

Prologue: A Holly Night

Thunder resounded in the distance as radiant light flashed across the sky. Torrents of rain poured to the muddy ground, and the sounds of it echoed through the neighbourhood. There was another crackle of lightning. A dog barked nearby, but it did so more from terror than anything else. Darkness shrouded everything, the street lamps barely giving any light.

Had anyone been looking outside, they wouldn't have been able to see anything save the rain.

A young girl of no more than six knelt in front of a window, outside looking in. Her long, black hair hung about her like a sopping blanket, and the water dripped onto her bony shoulders. Her skin was white, almost translucent, veins clearly visible. It prickled in the damp cold as she shivered and pulled her frayed dress around herself more fully, but it did little to block out the cold from her skeletally thin body.

Inside the house, light glowed from numerous lamps, casting friendly shadows on the walls and floor. A large, square table sat in the middle of a neat and tidy dining room. It was stacked with countless plates of food, all of them steaming and warm. A family was sitting down to a delicious looking supper.

The father was a portly man with a beet-red face and no noticeable neck. The mother was slender but healthy looking. She had twice the normal amount of neck and was horse-faced with enormous teeth. The son, though quite young, was rotund and seemed to be well on his way to taking up an entire side of the table.

Green eyes watched as the mother carried a large plate of roast to the table, which was almost completely filled with the other dishes. Steaming potatoes and carrots were placed on either side and were soon joined by a few other things. Rosy but chapped lips were licked at the sight of the meal, and the girl's breath steamed the clear glass of the window as she moved closer. A small, dirty hand cautiously wiped the surface clean so that she could get a better look, even as her mouth moved in a whispered prayer.

Within the house, the mother smacked a naughty hand away from the feast. The son scowled at her and rubbed his now tender fingers. The father roared with laughter at the antics of the pair and took a sip of the burgundy wine in his glass. He beamed proudly at his son, while the mother eyed her child, but the tips of her lips turned up with a hint of approval. Her hand touched his podgy cheek as the other rubbed his hurt fingers. She leaned down and kissed him lovingly, just as he tried to move away, a scowl etched on his heavy features.

Outside, hungry eyes watched the entire scene, and the girl lifted a slender hand to gently touch her own cheek, mimicking the movement of the woman. Her fingers rubbed the smooth skin, carefully avoiding the swollen and purpling flesh near her puffy eye. A small sigh escaped her, and she licked her lips as her teeth began to chatter.

The rain picked up its tempo, and the sound of it hitting the sodden ground grew louder. The shadows increased as it became even hazier, the street lamps not even visible anymore. A distinctive chill saturated the air, even as a slight warmth radiated from the house.

The tiny girl-child cuddled closer to the windowsill in an attempt to steal some of the heat, but it didn't seem to be working.

The family began to pass around dishes, piling their plates with food. There was a clatter of silverware as they started to dine, and their voices resounded in the air. The father mentioned selling a large order of drills, while the mother nodded, seemingly entranced by the conversation. The son growled angrily when he finally realised his mother wasn't listening to him drone on about his stupid teacher and his awful cousin, so he kicked her from underneath the table.

A faint smell of the delicious meal wafted through the cracks of the window, and the girl's small mouth began to water. She watched as each of the plates were quickly cleaned and then refilled, noticeably flinching as the father took third helpings of everything. She was forced to look away, her eyes gleaming with pain when the son started on his fifth serving.

Soon, there was not any food left on the table, not even miniscule crumbs. There was a temporary lull in the conversation as the mother stood and went through a door toward the kitchen.

Finally, the girl glanced back, her tiny stomach rumbling loudly.

Suddenly, the father's gaze flicked to the window.

She shrank back and hid in the ever deepening shadows. Her little frame trembled with fright, even as she tried to still her rapidly beating heart. Her fragile fingers nervously twisted at her dress, her eyes widening with terror.

After a few nerve-racking moments, voices again filled the air as the father laughed loudly.

The girl huddled for several more minutes before again peeking inside once more.

They were eating dessert, a large and bubbling pie.

She had to bite back her pathetic groan as she watched the entire thing systematically disappear.

It was gone rather quickly, and the family went in the direction of the parlour. They did not even bother to clear the table, clearly expecting someone else to do it for them.

The girl simply laid her head against the cool glass in a gesture of defeat, attempting to gain enough resolve to rise and enter the house. Belatedly, she noted that the rain had finally stopped and that the air had a crisp, damp smell to it. She glanced up to see that the sky had cleared enough for a few stars to shine through, but it was still rather cool outside, making her shiver.

She again attempted to force herself to rise, but instead, she only inched quietly to the side of the window where she would not be visible from inside. She rested her head on the freezing brick of the house, which still managed to be warmer than the glass, using her hair as a pillow. She looked up at the joyfully twinkling stars,

momentarily wishing she could share in their happiness and exhaled slowly as she gazed at them longingly.

She quickly noted Sirius, the Dog Star, remembering that it was supposed to be the brightest one of all.

As always, a sense of profound calm filled her small body. It was a common sensation when she stargazed, especially when viewing that particular one. It was her very favourite, though she was not really certain why.

For some reason, it brought to mind a dark-haired man with the most beautiful blue eyes she had ever seen, like silver mixed with sapphires. He always smiled impishly with a mischievous cast to his face, sometimes raking a hand through his long hair to purposely muss it. Oftentimes in her memories, it felt as though the man were holding her tightly, beaming down as he twirled her about, giving a barking laugh as she giggled.

Though, for the life of her, she couldn't clearly remember who the man was... or if she had ever really known him at all.

Regardless, a small smile touched her chapped lips as she thought of him, and she began to hum a nameless tune.

Instantly, she pictured flashes of a lovely lady with emeralds for eyes and vivid red hair.

In the girl's mind, the woman murmured loving words and hummed the same song as she smoothed back the child's hair. The lady beamed, and the girl could almost feel the woman rub her lips across her forehead.

A full moon peaked through the clouds, bathing the entire house in a silvery light, distracting her completely. The images shifted to a man with honey-brown hair and very gentle hands.

He waved a toy, a greyish-brown wolf, in front of her. His lips twitched with laughter as she quickly exchanged it for a stuffed, black dog. And he knelt on a wooden floor, trying to prevent her from chucking a toy rat into the nearby fire.

At a nearby home, a car pulled into the drive. She glanced over to see a mother and her son get out. The boy's round glasses reflected the streetlight, and another man appeared in her mind.

His warm, hazel eyes were hidden behind round-rimmed glasses, and she tugged on his messy hair that stuck up in the back. Like the first man, he held her in his arms, cradled to his chest, murmuring enchantingly in her little ear.

The girl sighed, hugging herself at the thought. She could hear his wonderful voice in her head, whispering to her lovingly.

"Once upon a time, in a far away land, there lived a young and beautiful girl named Holly..."

AN: Hello, everyone. I am a big fan of the girl Harry stories, so I thought that I would try my hand at one.

Also, I am not sure when Sirius is visible, if it even is in the Northern Hemisphere at all.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy it.

Chapter One: More Than They Think You Are

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter One: More Than They Think You Are

The wind whispered, leaves rattled, and tiny droplets of dew shimmered in the pre-dawn light. Inside of a perfectly normal house, a small girl lay huddled on an old cot. Her rickety bed trembled as she shivered uncontrollably and burrowed deeply into the flimsy mattress, her raggedy sheet was not enough to keep out the cold that permeated the area.

It was pitch black, the only discernable light coming from a pair of eyes, which gleamed despite the darkness. Instead, the girl-child snuggled into the night as if it was a blanket, one much better than the physical cover on top of her.

Faint sounds escaped her lips.

“Please... no. Please... don’t.”

Little Holly Potter lay trembling in her cupboard, begging the dawn not to arrive.

The darkness surrounding her expanded as if by magic. It wrapped around her more tightly, comforting the shivering girl with its embrace. The air stirred, and the wind whistled through cracks. Dawn was still approaching, though it seemed to have slowed.

The dark’s grasp was loosening, but it continued to hold on.

Murmurs were heard, words of love and comfort. But the darkness continued to fade.

The child sighed heavily and sat up, rubbing her eyes with bony fingers.

“Goodbye,” she whispered to the night.

She shifted, swinging her feet to the floor. The loose floorboards creaked slightly under the sudden weight, and she again sighed heavily.

Holly truly hated that sound; it often gave her away when she was stirring within her cupboard. She almost wished that the house was more sturdily built, but then, she wouldn't have a hiding place for her books.

The girl hesitated for a moment longer, and her hand reached for a pair of bent glasses that were lying on the floor. The spectacles were slightly crooked and taped at the nose, as though the owner had been repeatedly punched there.

Her pale hands lifted them to an equally pale and tired face, before travelling downward to rub the knots out of her back. Her lumpy but thin mattress was much too small, forcing her to curl up into a ball as she slept.

'But at least I have a bed now.'

Sinister thoughts entered her mind, but the child forced them away. It was not good to dwell on such things.

She shook her head and shrugged, eyes tightening in sudden pain, and her fingers went to the large, purpling bruise on her shoulder. It was still quite tender, and Holly winced as she softly ran her fingertips over it.

The girl shook her head again, dispelling her earlier line of thought as she gently eased to her feet and took the single half-step needed to reach the door of her cupboard. She turned the knob slightly, quietly, and the wooden door glided open noiselessly.

Holly went into the hallway, greeted by the light of a false dawn and the welcoming shadows. The child smiled gently at them, as if greeting an old friend. After all, they and the characters from her books were the only companions she had... well, at least the only ones that didn't abuse her in some way.

She gracefully walked down the hall into the dimly lit kitchen, her bare feet treading softly on the tile. She continued silently to the kitchen table, her hand going to the car keys on the surface and picking them up. She headed to the front door, and with a quick motion, Holly was outside.

She hesitated for a moment, gazing up at the multicoloured sky. Holly inhaled the fresh air, a nice change from the stuffy cupboard. She blinked rapidly as the sun peeped over the horizon, momentarily blinding her.

The wind picked up, rattling through the trees. A dog barked from a few houses down. A single cat sauntered up the sidewalk.

Holly enjoyed all of it as she trudged to the car in the drive, which she promptly unlocked.

Inside were dozens of packages, all wrapped in shiny paper with bows and ribbon on top. Birthday gifts for Dudley.

“Dudley would never think to look here,” Vernon had stated.

And Holly snorted at the memory.

The words **Dudley** and **think** were not often coupled together.

Holly stooped to fetch a package and eased the very large box up as best she could. She carefully turned toward the house, slowly moved to the front, and entered. Her fingers crackled, protesting the heavy weight as she inched to the kitchen, her arms shaking with strain. Finally, she was there and headed for the back wall. As gently as possible, Holly eased the gift to the floor, partially kneeling in the process. She exhaled heavily as she stood back up, her knees creaking. She stood there for a second before heading outside once again and repeating the process.

How she wished that it was not summer break. How she hated that she was treated as little more than a servant and not even a respected one at that.

If only she could be back in school, even though the other children relentlessly teased and taunted her. Not that she could really blame them.

After all, she was that “odd Potter girl” with the bent glasses and funny clothes. She was the outcast, the friendless freak everyone despised without really knowing why.

Then, there was the fact that Dudley Dursley, a rather large and aggressive boy, hated her very existence. The big lout and his gang would not only harass Holly but any and all who showed kindness to her.

Nevertheless, school was still better than here since Holly could not escape Dudley, even in her own home.

She did live with him, after all.

She was somewhat safe at school since the teachers could partially protect her from Dudley. Besides, Vernon dare not harm her in front of so many witnesses.

At school, she was happy. She could escape, at least for a time.

Holly still vividly remembered her first day of school and the excited children with their beaming parents. All the boys had eyed each other sheepishly, and the girls had giggled nervously. Petunia had gently squeezed Dudley's hand as she brought him to the building.

Holly had walked in alone.

The image of one child in particular remained in her memory from that day: a slight girl with golden hair that glistened in the sunlight. She had sat quietly on the school steps as a woman, her mother, lovingly twined the blonde tresses into braids. When she was finished, the woman had tied ribbons, pink ones, onto the ends. She had gently caressed her daughter's cheek, murmured loving words, and sent her baby on her way. The lady had stood by the school with tears clinging to her lashes as her daughter entered the building.

It had taken Holly months and various failed attempts before she knew how to braid, but she did not stop trying; she had to learn... so that when she twined the strands together, she could pretend someone else was doing it for her. Someone who tied little ribbons on the ends. Someone who afterwards caressed her face. Someone who whispered gently to her.

Someone who would actually miss her when she was gone.

Holly tucked a loose piece of hair behind her ear as she put down another package. She turned and again headed to the car. She nimbly manoeuvred toward the open door and leaned forward to grasp an additional package, a golden locket sliding out from under her dress. On the surface were an intertwined *L* and *J* etched within a heart.

It had been around her neck for as long as Holly could remember. Oftentimes at night, she would open it, eyes gazing at the truly remarkable pictures inside. However, the Holly didn't know where the locket had come from or how she had acquired it. She didn't even recognise the happy, smiling people in the pictures, not really. She did have some strange recollections of them, as if they had once been very important to her.

Of course, she had wondered about them, so she had asked.

(Flashback)

"Uncle Vernon," a timid voice inquired, "where did my locket come from?" Her green eyes were wide with curiosity.

"What locket? I don't see anything?" Vernon huffed, his features clenching. "What're you talking about, girl?"

"Isn't it pretty though, Uncle Vernon," Holly went on, indicating the open locket around her neck. "The pictures move! It's like magic."

At that statement, Vernon Dursley reddened. His beady eyes narrowed dangerously.

"What did you say?" he demanded and advanced towards his tiny niece.

Holly trembled and stumbled backward. She tripped, landing hard on the floor.

Vernon loomed over her.

The child's quaking voice squeaked, "It's like m--"

A giant beefy hand lurched out and struck the girl, leaving a large handprint on her face.

“THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS MAGIC!!” Vernon shouted, spit flying from his foaming mouth. His eyes bulged. “YOU!!” He wheezed, “You are nothing but an abomination! A worthless freak!”

(End of Flashback)

Holly paused, hands going to the locket around her neck. Her little fingers gently unlocked it, and she gazed at the pictures inside.

On the left, there was a man. He was slight of build but handsome with a wide grin, and he had round glasses and untidy, black hair.

And on the right, there was a lady. She was elegant and beautiful, her garnet-red hair matching her dazzling smile.

But the truly remarkable thing about the locket, aside from the people themselves, was that the pictures moved!

But how?

No technique or technology that she knew of could make something so small move like that.

Was it magic? Could it be?

The Dursleys said that magic was not possible, that it didn't exist.

Still, deep down in her heart of hearts, Holly knew they were lying.

Magic had to be real; how else would you explain all the strange things that seemed to happen when she was around? Like her teacher's hair suddenly turning blue after she had angered Holly? Or when she had unexpectedly appeared on top of the school while Dudley's gang was chasing her?

And Holly had an even bigger reason for believing in magic, even bigger than the strange locket.

How would the Dursleys explain all those voices she heard in her head?

‘They’d probably think I was crazed,’ Holly often mused to herself, ‘not that they don’t already, but I’m not. I know that what I hear are other people’s thoughts.’

She had always had strange impressions of people, seemingly knowing their emotions, even when they didn’t. Yet, she hadn’t realised she could also hear their thoughts until later. Holly had actually discovered this little fact by accident before she was even old enough to attend school.

One day, when she was hiding from Dudley’s gang, Holly had heard a voice telling her that she had been spotted. Deciding to listen, she had sprung from her hiding place, nearly colliding with Piers Polkiss, who was just about to grab her. She had then run away to safety.

Afterwards, Holly had continued to listen to the voices, noticing rather interesting things whenever she did. Things like the fact that she always knew when Petunia was about to yell at her, that she always accurately predicted when Vernon was especially angry and it was best to avoid him, or that she always foresaw when the other children were going to play pranks on her.

The voices in her head weren’t really voices at all; they were the thoughts of other people.

Combined with a few other things, these discoveries had led Holly down a dangerous path. At least in the Dursleys’ opinion.

What if magic was real?

‘But that is a thought for another time,’ she reprimanded herself. ‘I have work to do.’

The girl continued to unload gifts and shuffled to the kitchen. She was nearing the other boxes when her arms trembled, and Holly hurried forward. She knelt down, and the boxes tumbled gently, albeit unceremoniously, to the floor.

The child groaned and shook her head. Her hands went to her forehead, brushing back her bangs, and she started to rub circles on her temples, avoiding the lightening shaped scar that was always tender to the touch.

She exhaled and began to stack, her earlier memory resurfacing.

Vernon had called her a worthless freak.

While a freak she might be, she would be damned before she allowed herself to be worthless. But how was she to prevent it?

After much planning and contemplation, Holly had had an epiphany. The best way not to be worthless was to make something of herself, and to do that, knowledge was what she needed.

After all, knowledge led to power: the power to do anything that she wanted, the power to succeed.

So she studied and learned and studied even more. Holly fervently read and re-read her school books, and she completed all of her homework and did extra assignments. And Holly was careful not to over do it since no one liked a know-it-all.

However, an unforeseen problem had popped up: Vernon and Petunia would not allow their tiny, freakish niece to outshine their own son, especially not in academics.

Yet, that was easily solvable. The girl simply changed her grades on her progress reports, so to all appearances, she did not make above an average. And as for the teachers and their attempted praise, Holly begged them not to say anything. Of course, they reluctantly agreed, thinking she was either too shy or humble to desire the attention.

Holly's academic endeavours soon exceeded the classroom. Every morning, she checked a new book out of the school library, reading as much as she could during the school day. When she returned home, it was immediately hidden underneath her floorboards. After she had finished her chores at night, she secretly read using the torch she had nicked from her relatives.

And when the school books began to bore her, she journeyed to the main library a few streets over. The librarian there, a kind and elderly lady, liked her and allowed her to borrow as many books as her “little heart” desired.

And borrow books she did, everything she could get her hands on. She read every type of book imaginable: literature, science, history, and especially fantasy.

Holly finished stacking gifts, dismissing her thoughts. She rose to her feet and promptly returned to the car for more, adding them to the growing pile.

Several trips later, the girl made one last journey outside.

“Finally,” she breathed, “the last one.”

She went to the box but quickly stopped. Holly hesitated, staring at the last package.

It was an odd shade of green, almost luminescent.

She had seen that colour before in the dead of night, when she strained her memory and tried to remember the death of her parents.

An odd feeling rose up inside of her, agony mixed with despair and loneliness.

Flashes. Images. Memories filled her mind.

A bright, green light followed by a high and cold laugh. More light... Then, an intense pain on her forehead.

Holly shook her head, forcefully dispelling the images. She again gazed at the box. A shaking hand gently touched the package and lifted it. She shut the car door with a snap, but her eyes remained on the box clutched in her hands.

Why did this colour remind her of her parents? Why did this colour make her feel so very sad?

AN: This chapter is mainly exposition. Basically, I just wanted to introduce Holly and portray a little of her character. We'll get to the good stuff next chapter.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks!

Chapter Two: Magically Delivered

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Two: Magically Delivered

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY
Headmaster:ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)

Dear Miss Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on September 1. We are aware of your unfamiliarity with both the wizarding world and Hogwarts School. A staff member shall arrive on July 31 to answer any and all questions you or your guardians may have. At such time, pending your decision to attend, you will be taken to buy school supplies.

*Yours
Minerva
Deputy Headmistress*

*sincerely,
McGonagall*

Green eyes stared at the letter grasped tightly in her hand, shadows cast by her stolen torch dancing across the parchment. Her cot creaked as she shifted her weight, easing it off of her legs, which were curled underneath her. Another hand rested on the girl's cheek, rubbing small circles as she dazedly blinked, surprise clearly written across her face.

Little Holly Potter was very, very confused.

She sat quietly, locked within her cupboard. The Dursleys were gone, celebrating Dudley's eleventh birthday. They had taken Piers, one of Dudley's many bullying accomplices, with them.

Of course, Holly had been forbidden to go.

She had been taken rather forcefully by Petunia and shoved into her cupboard. Holly could still see the pleased smirk that the woman had had on her horsy face as she had grabbed her niece tightly by the

arm, bruising the tender flesh. Undoubtedly, the smirk had remained as the key was turned, locking Holly in.

As Vernon had stated, "We don't want to come back and find the house in ruins."

Holly began to stir, finally recovering from her stupor. But she continued to stare at the mysterious letter.

"Hogwarts... school... wizarding world!?" Holly murmured excitedly to herself, "Wizards... Witches... MAGIC!" She inhaled deeply. "It **is** real! I knew it!" She giggled ecstatically.

However, nasty and unbidden thoughts surfaced.

A hateful, pessimistic voice whispered in her mind, 'What if it the letter is false? Some cruel joke concocted by the Dursleys?'

'Like the Dursleys even know what a joke is,' answered another, kinder voice.

'True,' the first replied dryly. 'But they are cruel enough to do such a thing,' it added with a mental sneer.

'But are they actually smart enough to concoct such a plan?' the second responded sweetly.

The girl shook her head, dispelling whatever retort the former was forming.

'It is a bad sign,' she thought sardonically, 'having so many voices suddenly appear in my head. But then, I usually hear strange things.' She smirked slightly. 'Oh, the wonders of being a mind-reader.'

She shook her head, surprisingly smiling.

'Though voices that talk back are a rather new addition. At least now, I have someone to talk to who actually speaks back.'

Holly exhaled sharply, mentally shoving the bizarre, but all too true, thought from her head. She growled, her tiny hand balling into a fist.

This was just not her day.

(Flashback)

It started out as most days did for her: with some form of labour. Although today, it first involved carrying in and arranging birthday gifts for Dudley. Thankfully, this was only a yearly occurrence since it was rather hard for someone her size to carry such big packages.

Next, Holly proceeded with her normal chores. She hastily set the table and cooked breakfast, carefully nipping some for herself lest she starve the rest of the day. Though today, not unlike most days, all of Dudley's favourite breakfast foods were on the menu. Unfortunately for Holly, that list included almost every food known to mankind.

All told, it took the girl over three hours to complete her strenuous tasks without any assistance, much less gratitude, from the Dursleys.

All three were sleeping rather snugly in their over-large, fluffy beds the entire time.

Around nine, shortly after Holly finished cooking, the three Dursleys finally stirred and tromped downstairs. The girl strongly suspected that the appetising aroma from the meal woke the two Dursley males first and that the ensuing noise and morning chaos roused Petunia.

Whatever the cause, the three entered the kitchen with their normal grace and poise. This basically translated into Dudley shoving both adults out of his way, throwing open the kitchen door, and flinging himself onto his poor, debilitated chair. Dudley then proceeded to shovel food from his already waiting plate into his large, quivering mouth at light speed.

Mercifully, the adult Dursleys entered quietly and sat with some modicum of self control. Still, both loudly called, and in Petunia's case squealed, "Happy Birthday" to their son.

Petunia then sat silently, eating dainty bites and occasionally dabbing her horsy face with her napkin. Vernon gently eased into his squeaking chair, burying his face behind the morning paper Holly had thoughtfully set aside for him.

The only recognition she received for any of her efforts was from Vernon.

Upon taking a single bite of his specially made peppers and cheese omelette, the man stated, "My eggs are cold."

Moustache quivering, beady eyes travelled to Holly's face and rested on the lightning bolt scar on her forehead, situated just above her right eye. He had grimaced and returned to his meal.

And things, as they always seem to do, had gone from bad to worse.

Dudley, having ingested enough food to satisfy an army battalion, began to ogle and stare at his mountain of birthday gifts. Unfortunately, this led him to count said gifts. After numerous slips ups and false starts, he concluded that there were only thirty-seven presents. This in itself would not have been a problem, as Dudley loved receiving gifts, but the year before he had obtained thirty-eight gifts.

Petunia, with her keen eyes that could spot dirt a kilometre away, noticed the eminent Dudley tantrum. She immediately promised to buy two more while they were out, bringing his total to thirty-nine.

Eyes filling with disdain and her lips twisting into a sneer, Holly stepped out of the kitchen to supposedly check the post. Once in the hall, the girl hesitated and exhaled heavily, attempting to quell her restless stomach.

Displays of greed always made her feel nauseous, churning her stomach at the very thought of such gluttony. She sneered, wishing that Dudley would learn the consequences of his greed, and a small and treacherous part of her wondered when he would finally get his comeuppance. Hopefully, at the worst possible time.

The internal diatribe over, Holly continued down the hall to the front door.

On doormat laid three things: a postcard from Vernon's sister, Marge, who was currently vacationing at the Isle of Wright, a bill enclosed in a brown envelope, and... **a letter for Holly.**

The girl picked up the letter... **her** letter, staring at the envelope:

Miss		H.		Potter
The	Cupboard	under	the	Stairs
4		Privet		Drive
Little				Whinging
Surrey				

The envelope was thick and heavy, made of a strange, yellowish parchment. The green ink of the address glittered in the morning light, which was streaming in through the front windows. Turning the envelope over, her hand trembling, Holly noted the purple wax seal. It bore a coat of arms: a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a serpent surrounding a large *H*.

A set of eyebrows rose in surprise. "Who would write to me?"

She continued to stare at the envelope, eyes unblinking and face set in puzzlement.

"Well, it's most certainly not from the library. I never keep any books long enough for them to be overdue."

Vernon's nasty voice interrupted her curiosity, "Blast! Hurry up!" He growled menacingly but then chuckled. "What are you doing? Checking for letter bombs?" His voice carried with satisfaction since verbally torturing Holly was his favourite entertainment. "Maybe we will luck out, and one will get you!"

The girl quickly stashed the letter within her voluminous and ill-fitting dress, a hand-me-down from Petunia. She did not want **her** letter to be confiscated by the Dursleys, which they would do immediately upon sight.

She hurriedly returned to the kitchen, placing the bill and the postcard on the table next to Petunia. Holly's eyes travelled around the room, noting any interest in her delay, but there was none. Dudley was too wrapped up in ripping the paper from his gifts, while both Vernon and Petunia eagerly cheered him on. The three had not even noticed her return.

That was fine with little Holly, for her thoughts continued to swirl around the mysterious letter. But to all outward appearances, she was calm and collected.

She began to remove dirty dishes from the table, placing them on the tile counter beside the sink, only to pause in her work as the phone rang. She didn't move to it, however, because Petunia had already answered.

"Bad news, Vernon." Petunia angrily scowled. "Mrs. Figg has broken her leg." Her eyes flitted to the girl before sneering nastily. "She can't take the girl." She jerked her head in Holly's direction, fury written across her horsy face, her large teeth bared.

"Well, who do we know that could take her?" Vernon asked, his glaring at his tiny niece.

The two were speaking as though Holly was not even present in the room, a rather typical thing in the Dursley household.

A discussion quickly ensued, covering everyone from Marge to Yvonne, Petunia's gossipy friend. However, no one was available to look after Holly, and as Vernon quickly stated, "We will most certainly not leave her home, running free about the house."

His face steadily purpled, while a large vein continuously throbbed on his forehead.

"Then... I say that we leave her locked in the cupboard," Petunia fumed, lips bulging outward. "She can't possibly destroy the house while she's shut in there." She smirked darkly, her face glowing in a malicious light.

(End of Flashback)

And that was how Holly wound up in her current predicament, locked in her cupboard.

She inhaled faintly, her thoughts still on her relatives.

‘No doubt,’ she mused with a trace of bitterness, ‘by now they are again stuffing their faces, enjoying a rather large and delicious lunch complete with birthday cake. And afterwards, a trip to the zoo. Where Dudley and Piers will undoubtedly harass countless innocents.’ She chuckled, lips pulling into a sardonic smirk. ‘Animals and people alike.’

The smirk slid from Holly’s face as her thoughts again turned to her mysterious letter, doubts and fears continuously plaguing her mind. But buried deep within her mental recesses, there was a spark of hope.

“What if it is real?” she whispered to herself, her eyes glittering strangely. “What if Hogwarts really and truly exists?”

The last day of July started out like many others for Holly. Wake up, cook breakfast, steal some breakfast for herself, fetch the morning paper, and on.

Yet, it was a far from normal day. Today, her secret dream could finally come true... or she could suffer the greatest humiliation of her young life.

At the moment, both options seemed equally plausible.

The slender girl was currently standing on a small stool by the sink, scrubbing the breakfast dishes. Her ears twitch slightly, listening. And although her hands were hard at work, her green eyes were glazed over thinking, waiting.

Holly had not told the Dursleys about the mysterious letter, scared that it was only some form of cruel joke. She just could not take the chance. She had teetered with the decision but had ultimately adopted a wait-and-see approach. She had even gone as far as searching their surface thoughts for any hints of deception, discovering nothing helpful to her situation. Though she did learn that Dudley had a crush on the girl who lived three doors down.

But still, Holly had not told them. She had not even hinted about the letter; she just could not risk the ridicule.

So she waited, heart pounding in her throat, for some sign that it was not just a joke.

That it... all of it was true.

On a rather quiet and ordinary street, there was an ordinary house in which dwelled a not so ordinary family, the Dursleys and their niece, Holly. Not that any of the neighbours could discern this fact from the appearance of the Dursley home.

It was medium-sized and made entirely out of a reddish brick. The visible foundation was stone, painted and dyed to match the rest of the house. It was two storeys with four windows on top, three more and a door on the bottom.

The house practically screamed symmetry, normalcy, monotony.

Neat and well-cared for flowerbeds encircled the house, undoubtedly weeded by Holly, adding hints of colour to the tedium. A shiny, blue car sat in the drive. In the backyard, a hedge fence enclosed the property, and a trim and sickeningly clean shed stood with its back nestled in the bushes.

Everything was completely ordinary, entirely normal... well, except for the enormous man on the manicured front lawn.

‘It’s kinda plain,’ he thought to himself. ‘Borin’.

Warm, black eyes stared at the house, noting the absence of trees, animals, and any manner of **interesting** creatures. He sighed heavily, and a shovel-like hand rose to his face, scratching his rough beard.

The man finally walked forward, each step like a miniature earthquake. The brown front door was beckoning him, and he didn’t bother to resist the call. The giant raised an enormous fist to the peeling wood and knocked.

Or rather, he bashed.

AN: I know that in the book Harry did not get his first Hogwarts letter until after Dudley's birthday, but I want to hurry up and get this part of the story over with. I want to get to the good stuff.

Oh, Holly is not crazy for hearing voices. She is just lonely. And remember she is a mind-reader, so hearing voices is normal for her.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks!

Chapter Three: On the Road Again!

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Three: On the Road Again!

Dustbins, mailboxes, and even the occasional house jumped out of the way as a purple, triple-decker bus sped along a busy street. The bus swerved around various other vehicles as the driver, who seemed unaware of any and all traffic laws, avoided countless collisions. Around a dozen armchairs slid across the floor, moving with every turn and directional change. There was a loud BANG as the busy streets outside were replaced with fields and farms.

On the first storey sat two passengers. There was a giant of a man, who barely fit within his seat, and a bespectacled girl with dark hair. The enormous man was green-faced and appeared quite ill. His large and bearded head was between his knees or as close to his knees as possible for such a large person.

The small girl sat in one of the comfy chairs with her knees drawn up into her seat. There was a soft smile on her face, and her grin deepened and her lips twitched with concealed laughter every time her chair skated about the bus.

Holly was greatly enjoying the wizarding world thus far.

The child stared out a large and somewhat dusty window, watching trees, houses, and countryside whiz by. Her seat jerked and slid as there was another loud BANG, and the bus again jumped to a new location.

It was real. All of it: magic, witches, wizards. All of it was true.

(Flashback)

When Holly answered the door that morning, she had no idea what to expect. Sure, her letter clearly stated that someone was coming to speak to her, but she was doubtful of its veracity. She was so fearful that it was all a hoax, a cruel joke by the Dursleys that she hadn't even mentioned it to her guardians.

The girl twisted the doorknob and stepped back in shock.

There was a giant outside of the Dursleys' house!

She gaped, inclining her head upward to get a better look, eyes widening with surprise as she went.

The giant man grinned, face beaming. "Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts." His smile widened, and he inclined his enormous head in a slight bow. "Holly! Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby." Black eyes studied her intently. "Yeh look sorta like yer mom, but yeh've got dark hair like yer dad." He continued to look at her, a whisper of confusion crossing through his mind, but it was gone in an instant.

Holly, suddenly remembering the manners that the Dursleys had all but beaten into her, curtsied.

"Yes, sir," she answered softly. She moved next to the wall, allowing the man entrance into the house.

Hagrid lumbered into the entrance hall, his hand clutching a previously unnoticed umbrella. His gaze travelled around the entrance hall, noticing the flowery wallpaper and the pinkish carpeting.

"It's... er... a nice place yeh've got." His face took on a slightly nervous look.

Before Holly could respond to the attempted complement, the Dursleys made themselves known.

"Who is it girl?" Vernon bellowed from the kitchen. Without waiting for a response, he shouted, "Well, answer me!"

Holly, being unsure of what to say, remained silent.

Of course, this infuriated both Vernon and Petunia. Both burst through the kitchen door and stomped up to their niece, violence and retribution written across their faces.

Dudley, not wanting to miss out on Holly's punishment, waddled in his parents' wake.

Vernon marched straight up to her, painfully grabbing her wrist with his beefy hand. The man forcefully jerked the girl away from the door, bruising her pale skin.

But something rather unfortunate for the Dursleys happened then. They noticed the now snarling Hagrid.

“DURSLEY!” Hagrid bellowed furiously. “Yeh unhand her!”

His giant-sized hand gripped the pink umbrella, bringing it level with Vernon Dursley’s red face. Red and gold sparks shot out of the end, narrowly missing the other man’s head.

The Dursleys, taking one look at their rather large and now enraged guest, erupted into panic.

Petunia hurriedly stepped back and tripped on the cream-colored hall rug, falling to floor in a heap.

Vernon’s normally ruddy face became instantly white, his hand releasing his niece and dropping uselessly to his portly side. He sagged sideways into the wall, gasping for breath.

Dudley squealed like a frightened pig, and he back-pedalled toward the kitchen. Missing the door, he crashed unceremoniously into the wall and then fell face forward onto the floor, causing a tiny earthquake as he landed.

After a few seconds, Vernon finally recovered his voice. He opened his mouth to yell but was silenced by a single, deadly look from Hagrid.

All three Dursleys hurried to their feet, stumbling several times. They immediately ran to the kitchen and out the backdoor, leaving the small girl to fend for herself.

Hagrid watched the entire scene unfold before him, a faintly bemused look on his whiskered face. The girl merely stared after her relatives in a dazed trance. Hagrid again grinned and gently led the shocked girl into the lounge, placing her on the comfortable sofa. He situated

himself next to her, causing the couch to sink dramatically and groan under the strain.

“Holly, yeh received yer letter?” he questioned softly, looking at her intently and noting her affirmative nod. “Yeh understand that yer a witch.”

Holly nearly fainted at those words. “I’m a witch?” she queried, face registering surprise. She was nearly in shock at this point.

“O’ course,” Hagrid added, the great smile returning to his face. “Yer magical. Jus like yer parents.”

Holly tilted her head, gazing up at him. A hand instantly went to the locket clasped around her neck. A single tear threatened to leave her eyes and wind its way down her face, but she forced it away.

“My parents? Did you know them?” Holly asked hopefully.

Hagrid nodded briskly. “Nicer people yeh couldn’t find.” He had a strange cast to his face.

She exhaled, her eyes again taking on a glazed look as a memory surfaced.

A jet of green light followed by a high, cold laugh.

A sudden epiphany arose within her.

“They didn’t die in a car crash did they?” Holly asked softly.

“A car crash?” Hagrid had a perplexed expression. “Who told yeh...” His warm voice faded into silence when he noticed the cold, hurt look Holly gave him. “Was it those lousy Muggles?” he asked angrily, his furry face bristling.

She questioned nervously, “Muggles?”

In her experience, no good came from angry adults.

“Non-magic folk,” Hagrid fumed, but upon noticing the girl’s anxiety, he quieted.

Holly breathed out slowly; she might as well tell the truth. Oftentimes, it hurt far less to do so.

"If you mean the Dursleys... then yes. That is what Petunia and Vernon told me." She grimaced at the memory.

Hagrid sighed at Holly's confession. "No, wasn't no car crash." He again paused, uncertain how to proceed. "Look, not all magical folk are good. Some go bad... as bad as yeh can go. There was one wizard who went bad, so bad that people nowadays are still ter afraid ter even say his name."

"And what was his name?" Holly asked, interrupting Hagrid. She blushed faintly, noting her rudeness. "Sorry," she murmured.

"His name was..." Hagrid hesitated, nervously looking everywhere but Holly.

"Perhaps you could write it down," she injected helpfully.

"Nah... I can't spell it. Fine... *Voldemort!*" Hagrid visibly shuddered.

He grimaced and went on with his tale, highlighting all the important parts: sinister followers, fear, death, torture, her parents working with Dumbledore, her parents' murder, her survival... and her fame.

After the tale, Holly merely stared at him, her eyes glittering with unshed tears. "That is horrible," she whispered to herself.

The man nodded, his beetle eyes also shimmering with tears. He lifted a gigantic hand, and as gently as possible for one his size, he patted her shoulder.

"It tis," Hagrid replied, blinking back tears. "But there's good in magic, too... like Hogwarts."

Hagrid then proceeded to tell Holly all about Hogwarts or rather a summarised version there of: four houses, Dumbledore as the headmaster, classes, professors, and more.

Hagrid paused as he finished his rather long-winded monologue, attempting to phrase his next question.

“So duh yeh want ter go ter Hogwarts?” he asked, holding his breath.

Again, Holly gazed up at him. “I would love to.” Her face positively glowed.

(End of Flashback)

Another loud bang brought Holly out of her reverie.

“Ah, finally,” Hagrid mumbled, a look of pure nausea crossing his face. “I hate travellin’ like this.”

Both giant and child stood, one lumbering to his feet and the other gracefully unfolding herself. Hagrid staggered off the bus and onto a crowded sidewalk, Holly following in his wake. The man leaned on the pink umbrella still clutched tightly in his fist.

Holly simply raised both eyebrows, studying her surroundings.

They were on a bustling and busy street, filled with ever moving people. Still, no one seemed to notice the triple-decker bus. None of the hurrying people seemed to see the shabby looking pub Holly and Hagrid stood in front of either. It was almost as if the eyes of the passers-by slid from the record shop on one side to the bookstore on the other.

Nevertheless, while what she saw did not openly appear magical, Holly remained silent. She kept her concerns to herself as she studied the sign, which hung precariously above the door. She knew that appearances could be deceiving. For all she knew, The Leaky Cauldron could be a portal to some magical world.

Hagrid gulped heavily and lumbered to the door of the pub. “We haf to go in here to get to Diagon Alley.” He paused, noting her confusion. “Diagon Alley... it’s where we buy yer school stuff.”

Holly simply nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She stepped up behind Hagrid in order to follow him inside.

Hagrid again hesitated.

“Remember what I told yeh?” he asked gently, his skin quickly losing its green tints. “About yer fame,” he added. “Well, I reckon some folks are likely ter mob yeh when yeh get inside.”

Of course, Hagrid was quite correct.

Everything started out quietly enough. The girl and the giant entered the establishment, greeting the owner.

The bald man grinned at them, showing them his toothless mouth. “The usual, Hagrid?”

“Can’t, Tom. I’m on Hogwarts business,” Hagrid answered smoothly. He gently placed an enormous hand on Holly’s shoulder.

“Great Maker,” Tom whispered, peering at her. “Is this... can this be... bless my soul, Holly Potter!” he exclaimed suddenly, causing several people to glance up from their meals.

Dozens of eyes travelled instantly to the now very excited owner. Upon noticing the dark-haired girl with a lightening bolt scar, the patrons of the Leaky Cauldron gaped for a moment. And immediately after recovering, they descended her.

After many vigorous handshakes, where one man kept coming back for more, back pats, and awed introductions, Holly finally made headway to the rear of the Leaky Cauldron and the entrance to Diagon Alley. But there was one more obstacle in her way, a stuttering man.

He was young looking, maybe in his late twenties, with exceptionally pasty skin. His dark eyes gleamed peculiarly under the purple turban perched atop his head, studying her intently, as if searching for some hidden weakness.

Apparently, he was a teacher at Hogwarts, a Professor Quirrell.

Holly faked a smile as he introduced himself. There was a feeling of malice deep under the surface, faint and almost unperceivable but

still present. She ghosted his thoughts, only receiving the image of a blank wall for her efforts and the pervading sense of malevolence.

Holly fought the urge to shudder.

Sure, he stuttered and simpered, but to Holly, it all seemed a façade... an act. There was some strange and lingering feeling of cruelty, a deep hatred that did belong with the simpering man on the outside.

Hagrid exchanged pleasantries with the professor for a moment before leading Holly to the back of the pub and a blank, brick wall. He happily lifted his umbrella and tapped a pattern onto the wall, which she studied and committed to memory. The final brick disappeared, vanishing into thin air. The others magically began to pull away from the spot, forming an entranceway large enough for even Hagrid to easily pass through.

“Welcome to Diagon Alley,” he stated with his widest grin yet. Hagrid noted Holly’s look of pure awe, try as she might to conceal it, and patted her on the back as he gently led her through the gateway.

Yet, even as she stepped through the doorway and into Diagon Alley, Holly could feel eyes boring into her back.

The perilous feeling from earlier remained.

AN: I know that it is a little short on the descriptions of Hogwarts and Voldemort, but I figured that you already knew all about the subjects, so they were only briefly mentioned.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks!

Chapter Four: Diagonally Delightful

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Four: Diagonally Delightful

‘Magical!’

That was the only word that Holly’s awestruck mind could come up with when she first stepped into Diagon Alley.

‘Simply... magical!’

Green eyes were constantly flicking, side to side, up and down, as she tried to take in all of the sights. Her lips seemed to be frozen into a perpetual smile, but her mouth was also constantly twitching since it was taking every ounce of self-control she possessed to keep her jaw from hanging open. However, she continued to exert the effort; she did not want to appear the fool in front of the denizens of her new world.

While the sights and the people were very interesting, the mental voices were also quite loud. Her head began to pound with increasing pressure as the weight of so many consciousnesses bore down on her. Going through the city proper on the Knight Bus hadn’t nearly been this bad nor had her single visit to London before, but then, she had only been six at the time, her abilities not nearly as developed.

Regardless, Holly was prepared for such an instance, for she had diligently worked on filtering out mental noise.

She had first practiced blocking out the annoyingly loud and quite monotonous sounds of Dudley, whose mental voice was the equivalent of a steady pounding in her head. From there, she had graduated to filtering out the screeching thoughts of Petunia and the roaring ones of Vernon. Finally, she had moved on to blocking the other children from school, the various faculty members, and the people in her neighbourhood.

Her skill in shielding had progressed rather quickly, but that was more a thing of survival than anything else. It was nearly impossible to think, much less actually function, with so many voices bearing down on her. The discovery that she could block them out with only a little effort, which in itself had diminished considerably over time, had been a godsend.

In fact, Holly had become so successful in her shielding that she could block out everything, leaving only silence and her own voice in her head with almost no effort on her part.

Still, she would never shield completely. For one, the silence bothered her. Second, and more importantly, this way she heard the Dursleys and could prevent them from sneaking up on her.

Focusing on the task at hand, Holly tightened her mental shielding, increasing it from its normal level, and smiled as the voices went from roaring to just background noise. Her headache vanished, and Holly continued to take in her amazing surrounding.

Indeed, this place was truly wonderful, and her eyes were moving rapidly about trying to take it all in. Her gaze flickered from shop to shop, noting the varied and unimaginable goods being sold, things like unicorn horns and dung beetles. She also noted the strangely dressed shoppers bustling around her, moving hurriedly from one destination to another. Her eyes continued to diligently scan her surroundings, even as her tiny body surged through the crowd, following in Hagrid's wake.

However, one thing was bothering her, and finally, Holly had had enough.

"Excuse me, Hagrid," she inquired softly, "but where are we going?"

The gentle giant inclined his head toward the girl but continued walking, albeit much more slowly. "To Gringotts." Seeing the confused look on Holly's face, he went on, "Ter the wizarding bank, but tis run by Goblins."

At this comment, Holly's eyes widened. "Goblins? Bank? I don't have any money."

A dismal, dreadful thought suddenly occurred to the girl.

"How am I to pay for my school things?" she asked, fishing her list from a pocket. Her other hand was nervously playing with the tattered hem of her skirt.

The Dursleys would go berserk if they had to pay back Hagrid for her school supplies.

The large man glanced at her. "Yeh didn' think yer parents left yeh with nothin' did yeh? Yeh haf a vault from them," he answered with a grin.

"A vault?" Holly questioned, still clutching her frayed skirt.

Hagrid merely nodded, ambling down the street, but Holly paused.

All this time, while she was half-starving and forced to wear clothing that was falling apart, she had had money. Her fingers were now gripping her skirt so hard that her knuckles turned white. A sudden, swift feeling arose within her, not unlike a cold fury, but it was quickly quenched as an idea came to mind.

"Do you think it would be possible to buy some additional things? Things not on my list?" she asked sweetly, eyes gleaming enchantingly. She unclenched her hand and fingered her black skirt.

Hagrid paused, considering. "Like what?"

The girl smiled pleasantly. "Oh, just some books." She again fingered her hem. "And maybe some clothes for school." Emerald eyes were nearly glowing.

"Sure, that should be fine." He nodded his large head and again started walking, Holly moving quickly to keep up.

The pair went swiftly, too swiftly in Holly's opinion, towards a white building with columns. Hagrid surged blithely up the marble steps and through the golden doors, but Holly hesitated, stopping to inspect the inscription:

Enter, stranger, but take heed

Of what awaits the sin...

A bizarre feeling rose within Holly, stopping her from reading the rest. She shook her head forcefully, whipping her two braids through the air. Something deep within her was telling Holly to not continue.

Without casting another glance at the door, she hurried into the building. The girl scanned the crowd, searching for Hagrid and quickly finding him over to the side, speaking with a short and rather ugly creature. Given previous information, Holly assumed that it was a Goblin.

Moving smoothly to his side, the girl heard the last snippet of their conversation.

“...from vault you-know-which,” Hagrid muttered quietly to the Goblin. Receiving a swift head nod from the creature, the man turned to Holly, not even noticing that she hadn’t been there the entire time.

“Ready ter go? We haf ter take a cart.” He shuddered.

One wild cart ride later the pair was again outside. The trip itself was short since their only stops had been Holly’s vault, where she had goggled at the sheer amount of money in her vault, and vault 713, where Hagrid had removed a grubby package.

Holly was now in possession of more money than she had ever had in her entire life, and she inspected her shabby clothes, wondering how Hagrid hadn’t managed to notice the state of her dress.

She glanced upwards at her guide, tilting her head as far back as she could to look into his eyes. “Hagrid, may I purchase my new clothing now? I know that Aunt Petunia will be delighted that I won’t have to go out later for them.”

Inwardly, she smirked.

Petunia was always delighted when she had an excuse to not buy Holly proper things, not that she would have bought her niece clothing anyway as she wore Petunia’s old dresses. Now, however, Holly would actually be able to wear clothes that actually fit. More importantly, they would be only hers and belong to no one else.

“Um... should be fine. We can pick ‘em up when we get yer robes,” Hagrid, who was looking rather green, answered haltingly.

He led her to a shop, Madam Malkin’s Robes for All Occasions, but stopped just outside the door.

“Listen, Holly, would yeh mind if I slipped off fer a pick-me-up in the Leaky Cauldron? I hate that blasted bus and ‘em Gringotts carts.” He shifted his feet nervously. “I might take a bit, so meet meh in Flourish and Blotts. It’s just down the way, a few stores over.”

Holly, not wanting to be left alone in a completely unfamiliar place, did mind. However, after taking another look at Hagrid’s increasingly queasy face, she acquiesced graciously. The girl watched the man lumber off in the direction of the pub before turning to the door and nervously entering the shop. Inside, she was immediately descended upon by a short, squat witch dressed all in mauve, Madam Malkin herself.

“Hogwarts, dear?” the witch asked rather sedately. Clearly, she was not aware who she was waiting upon.

“Yes, ma’am,” Holly answered steadily. Taking all her lessons from the Dursleys in respect to authority figures to heart, she bowed her head courteously.

Madam Malkin smiled at Holly’s response and eyed her dress speculatively. “Is it just robes you’re interested in, or would you like to view some of our other clothing as well?”

Holly inwardly sighed in relief; this was going to be a lot easier than she had originally imagined.

“I would like to look at some other things also.” She fingered her tatty skirt before bravely adding, “It seems that I need an entirely new wardrobe. I do have the funds to pay for it,” she put in as an afterthought.

Madam Malkin merely shrugged and led her to the far left-hand side of the shop, toward a closed door. As Holly followed she noted a pale, blond boy with a pointed face and aristocratic features. He looked to

be a first-year, standing atop a stool as he was measured by one of the assistants.

Holly nodded to him as she passed, receiving a nod and a polite smile in return.

What followed was basically a whirlwind experience of trying on new clothing: dresses, skirts, tops, etc. After the girl confessed that she knew very little about fashion or garments in general, Madam Malkin danced about the female section, dragging an unwitting Holly with her. In the next few hours, she learned more about style and colour than she ever thought possible, but Holly took great pains to remember so that the next time she required clothing there would be no repeat experience.

Finally, after obtaining a small mountain's worth of new possessions, including under things that the girl quickly added, not wanting to have to go without like she currently was, Holly was measured for school robes. Here, Madam Malkin yet again went above and beyond expectation by making additional non-school robes in various shades, mostly greens since Holly loved the colour and because "They match your lovely eyes, dear."

Almost two hours later, wearing a brand new green dress with golden embroidery, there was no Hagrid in sight. As such, Holly meandered down the street to her next stop.

However, the girl suddenly froze half-way when she felt a vaguely familiar presence nearby. She scanned the crowd before finally landing on a man with honey-brown hair that was mixed very liberal amounts of silver. His head was bowed, eyes staring listlessly at the ground as he slowly walking towards her.

Holly simply stared at him as he approached, rapidly searching through her memories trying to remember where she had seen him before.

Just as he shuffled by a single word reared in her mind. Without even thinking, she whispered softly, so softly that no ordinary person could have possibly heard.

“Moony?”

In an instant, his head snapped up. The man whirled to face her, golden eyes now staring at her in disbelief.

“What did you say?” He studied her face, glancing at first her glasses and then her eyes. He inhaled sharply.

Holly looked at him and responded bravely, “Moony.” Drawing up courage, she looked him directly in the eyes.

“I said Moony,” she added louder, finding even more courage. “Someone I remember from years ago.” The girl noted his blank expression, and her heart fell. She hesitated for a second.

“I’m sorry, but you remind me of him.” She shook her head in shame. “It was my mistake.”

Holly turned to leave but was halted by a gentle hand on her shoulder, and she instinctively flinched back.

The man immediately noticed, his hand sliding off.

“Holly?”

She turned towards him.

“It is you; I know it.” Not once did he glance at her scar, but somehow, he looked totally convinced about her identity. “You look so much like your mother.” He simply stared at her in wonder, beaming all the while. “You’ve grown so very much. I almost didn’t recognise you.” He continued to gaze at her in almost awe.

Holly smiled nervously. “Moony...” She paused and thought for a moment. “Re- Remus...” She stopped not knowing what to else say.

Finally, deciding that honesty was probably the best approach, she stated, “I don’t really know what to say.”

Remus chuckled. "I don't really either. I wasn't expecting this." He sighed but continued smiling. However, he suddenly glanced around suspiciously.

"Er... I don't mean to sound rude, but shouldn't there be someone here with you?"

His thoughts were filled with concern that Holly was either lost or separated from her companion(s). Yet, there was a distinct undertone of nervousness to his mind. Strange thoughts kept running through his head.

'I'm not supposed to see Holly. I was told to stay away.' Followed by, 'Why did she flinch? Does she remember **that**? But why would she talk to me then?'

Holly was insanely curious why he thought such things, but she had no way of asking. Instead, she answered his earlier question.

"Yes, I was just on my way to meet him." She glanced at Remus before continuing, "I'm here to pick up my school things."

Remus' eyes widened in sudden understanding. 'Hogwarts... You knew that she'd be going this year,' Holly heard him think. 'She must be here with either Minerva or Filius. They are usually the ones to take students.'

An odd suspicion formed in Holly's mind when she heard that.

"I'm here with Hagrid," she smoothly added in.

"Oh, really?" Remus inquired with a hint of surprise.

But his thoughts betrayed him. 'Why would Dumbledore send Hagrid? He has to know that Petunia would have only told Holly the bare minimum about our world. Minerva would be much better at filling her in on everything.'

Holly practically growled at the thought of Petunia, pondering how exactly Remus knew she lived with her aunt. Nonetheless, there was

no possible way for Holly to voice this question without raising suspicions.

She glanced up at Remus, who was now searching the crowds for someone. She saw him stiffen suddenly and twitch his hands apprehensively. The girl flicked her eyes down the street, searching for what was making him so very nervous, but all she saw was a multitude of strangers and a large shape lumbering down the street nonchalantly...

Hagrid was coming

She glanced at Remus and noted that he was indeed staring at the giant man.

Remus gazed up the street his nervousness becoming more and more evident as Hagrid came closer.

"I'm truly sorry, but I have to go," he stated politely.

However, his mind was screaming, 'No, not now. I haven't had a chance to talk to her. But I mustn't be seen with her.'

He turned back to Holly, sadness in the gesture. A sudden and wild idea filled his head, but he still hesitated.

"Look, I know that you don't really know me... but could I... I mean, may I write to you? The school will have owls, if you want to write back," he added the last wistfully and gave her a small but hopeful smile.

Holly studied him. "I would like that very much," she responded evenly, surprising herself because calm was not what she was currently feeling.

Being able to speak to someone who knew her parents was like a dream come true.

"Fine then." He again grinned and looked up the street. Remus moved to leave but not before squeezing her shoulder and whispering in her ear, "Happy Birthday, pup."

Holly tilted her head to look up at him, but he was already gone. She simply stood in the street, the crowd bustling around her, thinking about what had just transpired.

'Imagine the odds,' she thought to herself, 'imagine the odds of running into him on my very first trip to Diagon Alley. Must be fate.'

A sudden weight on her shoulder startled her out of her reverie.

"Ah good, there you're, Holly. Ready ter go get yer books?" Hagrid beamed at her, removing his hand from her shoulder as he steered her toward the bookshop.

Holly, allowing herself to be led along, searched for Remus in the crowd, but he had already disappeared into the throng of people.

The trip through the bookstore, Flourish and Blotts, was by far the most exhilarating experience of her young life. Hagrid, after seeing her extreme enthusiasm in regards to books, sat himself in a chair by the entrance and allowed her free reign. Of course, this might not have been the wisest course of action because she had wandered down each and every aisle, regardless of the subject matter, before she even began to pick-up books. Thankfully, her store-basket rather mysteriously seemed to weigh the same no matter how much Holly piled in it.

She quickly selected all of the first-year books from her list before coming to the register to ask the manager the second-year set. However, Holly first had to wait as a tall gentleman, who resembled the boy she had seen in Madam Malkin's, spoke to the cashier about a special order he had made.

Eventually, it was her turn, and she asked about the second-year texts. She received an odd look from both the manager and the blond gentleman due to this request, but Holly deftly avoided any awkward questions by stating that they were for a friend, which of course they weren't.

The child also asked for supplementary materials to her first-year coursework, receiving extra books that seemed to cover magical basics with far more depth than those on the list. Among the

additional material, there were two books on Transfiguration, one written by A. Dumbledore. There were also two volumes on Charms, three on Defence Against the Dark Arts, all authored by Alastor Moody, and multiple Potions and Herbology ones that all seemed to be interrelated. Finally, she received two History books and another for Astronomy.

By far, the most prized of Holly's collection was one of the Potions volumes, written by S. Snape. It detailed the properties of all the basic potion ingredients up to those used in fifth year. She briefly flipped through the pages, noticing the witty and sarcastic style of the author, something that made her smirk with delight.

A two-volume set entitled Curses and Counter-Curses by Professor Vindictus Viridian came in a close second, covering a wide variety of useful jinxes, hexes, curses, and their counters.

Yet, even with all of her additional books, Holly was still not satisfied. She was going to enter a school she knew next to nothing about. Additionally, she was entering a world and a culture that were entirely new to her.

To solve these problems, further books, such as Hogwarts: A History and A Muggleborn's Guide to the Magical World, were added to her ever growing pile. The girl eyed these two new additions speculatively, knowing that these would be the first she read so that she might be acquainted with the basic framework of her new people.

Rather surprisingly, Holly did not purchase anything on the Girl-Who-Lived. She had looked at these, even flipped through a few, but the girl wanted nothing to do with them. This, from a girl whose first and only friends were books, was quite the oddity.

Yet, Holly truly did not desire to buy such things. Being famous at the expense of her parents' lives was not something she wanted to read about, much less actually experience.

On her third pass through the store, where she was looking for anything she might have missed, Holly quite literally stumbled across another person, or rather two people.

Both were kneeling on the floor, searching for something on the very bottom shelf, when Holly turned the corner and nearly tripped over them. The only thing that prevented her from striding on the pair were her fast reflexes, which caused her to quickly sidestep. The not-so-oblivious duo glanced upwards at the newcomer, and two sets of eyes studied her intently. Apparently liking what they saw, they stood, and Holly finally had the opportunity to actually view her companions.

They were about her age, though the girl appeared to be a year or two older. The closer of the two was an average height boy. He was brunet and slender with an oval face and eyes so dark a brown to be almost black. The girl had a similar build and look, though she was taller and possessed blue eyes that had a violet cast to them. Both had rich, almost caramel-coloured skin.

The duo smiled in half greeting and apology, but it was the boy who took the lead and spoke first.

“Sorry for being in your way. We were looking for a book on the bottom shelf.” He grinned at her charmingly. “I’m Blaise Zabini, by the way.” He gestured to his friend. “This is my cousin, Aléjandra Zabini-Rookwood.”

“Please, call me Alé. All my friends do.” She smiled brightly at Holly, offering her hand, which she promptly took.

The green-eyed girl felt a tingle race through her fingers when she first touched the other girl, but it was gone in an instant. Further, Alé didn’t even seem to notice anything was amiss.

Holly wasn’t sure of what had just happened, but she sensed that both were being sincere in their desire to greet her. She decided to take the chance and introduce herself.

“Holly... Holly Potter.”

Their eyes widened at that statement, but she quickly noted that, unlike Hagrid and the people in the Leaky Cauldron, neither of them stared at her scar. It was fact and a nicety Holly was quite grateful for, although Alé and Blaise did glance at each other.

And with barely a second's pause, Blaise answered, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

He shook her hand as well. Again, Holly felt the flash of something within her, though a great deal stronger this time. So strong, in fact, that it felt more like a jolt of electricity racing through her, and it continued to linger.

Blaise actually seemed to notice, where his cousin did not, and he shook his head to clear it.

This hadn't happen when either Hagrid or Remus had touched her earlier, but then, they had only had contact with her clothing, not her skin. Also, if they were to be believed, both had known her when she was very small, and Holly idly began to wonder if this would happen every time she touched someone magical or if it only occurred when there was skin-to-skin contact for the very first time.

That thought in the back of her mind, Holly chatted politely with her companions for several moments, liking the easy atmosphere. She quickly learned that Blaise was an incoming first-year as well, while Alé was a third-year Ravenclaw. From there, the conversation seemed to take on a life of its own. The three were soon engaged in a discussion about the volume Blaise and Alé had been looking for, coincidentally Hogwarts: A History, which Holly promptly showed them was actually located on the third shelf of the opposite bookcase.

She further discovered that both she and Blaise shared a mutual love of books, both Muggle and magical alike in Blaise's case. The two quickly became involved in an exchange about the hidden meanings of a select number of Shakespeare's works, leaving a bemused Alé almost completely out of the conversation.

"I never thought I would find someone who loved to read as much as Blaise," Alé commented during a lull. "I'm a Ravenclaw; we are supposed to be the knowledge loving ones, but still, even I do not read as much as him." She eyed both of them with mock seriousness. "You two are most definitely Ravenclaw material."

“Well, I don’t know about that, Cousin.” Blaise smirk wickedly. “I might be a Slytherin. According to grandfather, I’m certainly sneaky enough for it.”

Alé snorted. “Too true.” She turned to the other girl. “That one’s a prankster.” She pointed to her cousin and whispered in a false undertone, “You had better watch out for him, especially if you end up in his House. It’s always the quiet ones,” she added dramatically, rolling her eyes. “Not that he’s really quiet unless he is engrossed in a book. He practically walks around with them stuck to his hands.” She sighed spectacularly, eliciting a giggle from Holly.

“Or with my stunning work ethic and steadfast loyalty, I could always be in Hufflepuff,” Blaise went on blithely, ignoring the other two.

“Sure,” Alé inserted, rolling her eyes again. “But your total lack of humility will bar you from that House as well.” She looked at Blaise with a wicked grin.

Throughout the entire exchange, Holly had watched with growing amusement and happiness. She had never before been spoken to like this, like she was both an equal and a friend. Not like she was a worthless freak.

This fact was undoubtedly what led Holly to venture into the conversation as well.

“Or what about Gryffindor?” she asked boldly, praying that she wouldn’t offend her new quasi-friends.

Alé’s impish smirk widened. “Yes, that would be perfect. They do have a tendency to run away at the mouth.” She laughed at the thought, ignoring Blaise’s snort. She again winked at Holly.

“An excellent suggestion. Oh, don’t be like that, Cousin,” she added at his frosty look. “Not all Gryffindors are bad. My friend Alicia Spinnet is top rate Ravenclaw material; the Hat just decided to put her with the Lions.” Alé’s smirk gentled at the mention of her friend. “Or take the Weasley twins, for example. With all their pranks and deviousness, they are surely Slytherins in disguise.”

Blaise nodded slowly, seemingly accepting her answer, but Holly actually looked at Alé in surprise.

“Hat? Excuse me, but did you say hat?” she questioned her female companion.

Alé looked confused for a moment before her eyes widened in sudden understanding. “Oh, that’s right. You probably don’t know about the Sorting Hat; most first-years don’t.” Seeing Holly’s nod, she carried on, “It is how they decide which House is best for a student. They place it on your head, and it tells you where to go.”

Holly gazed at her blankly. “It tells you where to go?”

“Oh, yes,” the boy inserted. “I heard that it is enchanted.”

Holly nodded, trying to wrap her mind around the idea of a talking hat when an odd idea occurred to her. “So,” she asked her companions, “would you mind telling me about the four Houses?”

Sometime later, after an enlightening discussion about the four Hogwarts Houses, Holly heard the door to the shop open and more costumers come inside.

Blaise leaned forward to peak around the bookcase. Apparently pleased by what he saw, he grinned again.

“Brilliant,” Blaise said to both girls, “Draco is here. I knew that he would probably stop by since his father was here buying his books.”

“Draco?” Holly asked curiously.

“Oh, yes. Draco Malfoy,” Blaise answered after a moment. “He’s a friend of ours. We’ve been passing acquaintances since we were very young, but much better friends for the last year or so.”

“Draco is a first-year, too,” Alé stated, winking at the two younger students. “I imagine that you will be running into each other a lot in the future.”

Blaise was about to resume his description of Draco Malfoy when the pale, blond boy from Madam Malkin's walked around the corner and came up them. His silvery eyes went from Blaise to Alé, who he politely greeted, and instantly to Holly.

"Well, hello." He stated, "I believe that I saw you earlier in the robe shop. Fancy seeing you here as well. Draco Malfoy." He offered his hand to Holly.

She eyed him for a split second, getting his measure. "Holly Potter."

At her statement, Draco smiled, and like his friends, he did not look for her scar

Holly moved to grasp his hand but was interrupted when she felt Hagrid's presence coming up behind her. She turned to look at the man and felt a giant hand land on her shoulder, causing her to stagger and flinch.

He began to pull her away.

"Ah, there yeh are, Holly." Hagrid looked at the girl's companions warily. "We'd best be goin'. Yeh still need other things." He again eyed the other children present, still steering her from them.

"Goodbye," Holly quickly said to her new friends as she was escorted away. "I hope to see you at school."

"Or possibly the train on the way," Draco replied. "We'll probably see you there."

"We'll see you on the train to school then," Blaise called to her. "Actually," he went on, "why don't you meet us there and sit with us? We can introduce you to our other friends as well." He paused, thinking. "We should be near the middle."

Holly smiled at the invitation and nodded firmly, allowing Hagrid to drag her first to the counter and then from the store.

Once they were outside, he gave her a pointed look. "Yeh need to watch out for some people, Holly." He moved to face her. "Some of

You-Know-Who's followers are still about. Said they were befuddled or forced into it; codswallop in my opinion." He led her down the bustling street. "Their kids will be going to school with yeh."

He growled and cast a look back at Draco Malfoy, who was now standing outside the bookshop with the very same gentleman she had seen earlier.

Hagrid went on carelessly, "Yeh shouldn't associate with them." He growled again and muttered under his breath, all the while mentally screaming about lousy Slytherins and their spawn.

Holly listened intently, mentally disagreeing but not voicing her doubts. Although she had been around Draco for mere seconds, she had still managed to adequately get his measure, and she was not the least bit wary of him, in spite of Hagrid's worries. She had felt nothing but sincerity at their meeting. Holly honestly felt that, while it wise to be wary of his parents due to their past association with Voldemort, Draco Malfoy would make an excellent acquaintance and possibly, and quite hopefully, a friend.

From the bookshop, a now somewhat happier Hagrid and slightly saddened Holly proceeded to the Apothecary, where the girl procured a cauldron and a few basic ingredients. Next, the unlikely pair continued to Eeylops Owl Emporium, and an embarrassed Holly was presented with her very first birthday gift, a snowy owl. She smiled shyly and profusely thanked a bemused Hagrid before he steered her to the wand shop.

Holly entered the dusty and dark store uneasily, warning bells going off in her head. She approached the counter carefully but whirled around as she felt another mind coming up behind her.

This seemed to startle the old man, who was now standing directly in front of the girl, and his whitish-silver eyes narrowed.

"Hello," Holly stated, bowing her head faintly. "Are you Mr. Ollivander?" she asked, remembering the name on the outside of the store.

“Ah, yes. Yes, I am.” He was clearly impressed by the fact that he had not been able to sneak up on her and gazed at her forehead for a second. “And you must be Miss Potter. I thought that I would be seeing you soon.” His odd smile widened. “You have your mother’s eyes. It seems like only yesterday that she was in here, buying her first wand. Ten-and-a-quarter inches long, swishy, made of willow. Nice wand for charm work.”

Mr. Ollivander again glanced at Holly’s forehead, his thoughts of Voldemort and the wand he had sold him.

Thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew and very powerful.

He shook the thought from his head and continued, telling her of both her father’s and Hagrid’s wands. That embarrassed the giant and caused him to clutch his pink umbrella more firmly.

From there, Mr. Ollivander asked about her wand arm, her right. Holly did know how to write with her left due to a broken right wrist, courtesy of one Dudley Dursley, a few years back. The older man then began to measure her: from shoulder to finger, wrist to elbow, shoulder to floor, knee to armpit, round her head, etc. and describe the various attributes of Ollivander wands. He pulled various wands off the shelf, giving them to the girl with an order to, “Give it a wave.”

After dozens of attempts, Holly was beginning to show inward, but not outward, signs of annoyance.

‘Surely,’ she thought rather harshly, ‘there must be a better way to do this. A spell perhaps?’ She opened her mouth and actually voiced this idea to Mr. Ollivander, giving him another surprise and earning herself a shrewd, calculating look.

The older man smiled at her suggestion. He pointed his wand at her and quickly muttered several words, which Holly still managed to hear.

“Accio Magum Adaequo.”

On a distant shelf, a dusty box flew open, and a shiny wand shot out. It flew through the air and landed neatly in Mr. Ollivander’s

outstretched hand. His grin increased ten-fold as he studied the wand in his hand.

“Unusual combination – holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple,” he told Holly proudly as he handed it to her.

“**Holly**, you say,” she stated, emphasising the word that was both her name and the material of the wand.

Holly reached forward and grasped the wand... and wonderful warmth filled her as she touched it. The constant hum of voices in her head faded to silence as the most magnificent melody entered her mind. Magic rose up inside of her, and she felt it coursing through her veins. She waved the wand gracefully, shooting out three differing coloured sparks: gold, silver, and odd crystal-like ones that changed colour as the strange lighting of the store hit them.

Both Hagrid and Mr. Ollivander seemed shocked into silence: Hagrid from the entire spectacle of casting a spell to find her a wand and Mr. Ollivander by the sparks she had created.

After several moments, in which the girl merrily but rather sedately scrutinised her new wand, Mr. Ollivander finally found his voice.

“Curious. Curious...” Seeing her unvoiced question, he went on, “I remember every wand I’ve ever sold, Miss Potter. Every single wand.” He paused and gave her a very pointed look. “It so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand, gave another feather. Just one other. It is very curious indeed that you should be destined for this wand when its brother – why, its brother gave you that scar.”

Emerald eyes gazed at him in half-wonder, half-wariness before returning to her wand. “That is rather curious, Mr. Ollivander,” Holly acquiesced evenly after several moments.

Soon after the **interesting** encounter, she paid seven Galleons for her wand and was led out of the store and down the street.

Even days afterward she would still remember the odd look on Mr. Ollivander’s face as he watched her leave. Those silvery, mist eyes

studied her, as though he knew something very important. Something that try as she might, Holly could not glean from his surface thoughts.

Holly laid in the creaky bed of her new bedroom. Upon returning from her first foray into the wizarding world, Hagrid had taken the Dursleys aside and set a few ground rules for the family. The girl was not entirely sure what the talking to had entailed, Hagrid not letting her attend, but whatever had occurred, the Dursleys were now sufficiently cowed. They would not be bothering her anytime soon.

Her eyes sparkled as Holly gazed around the room. Formally Dudley's second bedroom, it was now **her** room.

"My room," she whispered to the shadows, beaming. She had never truly had a bedroom before; the cupboard under the stairs definitely did not count.

"Come to think of it," she mused softly, "I haven't really had much of anything before. Not many clothes, no books... I've never really owned anything," she added wistfully, "except..."

A hand travel to her neck and the thin, metallic chain encircling it. She gently lifted a locket to her eyes, and her fingers smoothed over the exterior, opening it. Holly gazed longingly at the happy faces within as her finger ran across the exposed surface, caressing their faces.

Green eyes blinked sharply, fighting back tears.

The girl stared for several moments before silently closing the locket. The intertwined *L* and *J* on the surface gleamed in the pale moonlight.

Lightly, she turned the necklace over, studying the miniscule writing on the back:

*For Dreams are not just for the wealthy
Love is not just for the blind.
I will follow you for forever,
If you promise that you are mine.*

Accio Magum Adaequo: Come Magical Match. Verbal and non-verbal. Summons a wand to match the magical core of a person.

AN: I know the whole Blaise and Draco as Harry's – or in this case, Holly's – friends has been done before, but I am still going to use them as characters. Since so much about both of them is unknown, I can basically characterise them anyway I want. This way Holly has friends who aren't OCs. I intend to also do this with other obscure canon characters.

Also, I threw Remus in here because I didn't want Holly to wait to the third book to meet him. Diagon Alley seemed the perfect place to toss him into the story. I maintain that it is entirely possible that Remus was actually there in canon during Harry's first trip, but Harry either didn't see him or Hagrid steered him away. Still, it is possible but very doubtful.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks!

Chapter Five: Trains, Truces, and Terrors

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Five: Trains, Truces, and a Turning Point

Over the month following her whirlwind-like journey through Diagon Alley, much had stayed the same in Holly's life, while much had also changed.

She still read constantly, but now, she did so in the safety of her own bedroom at anytime she desired, which was always, without fear of reprisal from the Dursleys. Further, every morning she still made breakfast, but now, it was for herself, not her relatives. And she was actually allowed to eat her food at the table.

Yet, there were still some new additions to Holly's life like her owl, Hedwig, who was named after one of the people in her magical books and who was rapidly becoming the girl's best friend. Magic was also a welcome change to her life as she practiced it at every opportunity. She had attempted and successfully cast several spells from her books, including one that levitated objects and another that turned a match into a needle, though it had taken her several tries to do anything more than make it silvery.

However, there was one other new addition to her life: a Mr. Remus Lupin.

Holly had written him a total of four times during the month leading up to school, averaging one letter a week. She had talked about her life, carefully leaving out any mention of mistreatment by the Dursleys, and her interests, mostly books but ranging from her favourite type of music to her favourite sweet, Mars Bars. Yet, what had truly surprised the child, other than her willingness to open up to a man she barely knew or remembered, was the fact that he actually wrote back.

All in all, though the wait to September 1st was a long one, Holly thoroughly enjoyed it.

The night before the train ride to Hogwarts was one wrought with nervousness and anticipation. This is perhaps why she had such vivid dreams.

She dreamt of a lady with hair that was silver and gold, as though someone had taken the two metals and woven them together, and a

man with hair so dark that it almost made black look pale in comparison. The couple was in what appeared to be a cross between a castle's garden and its parlour. There was furniture, though most of it was nature themed, and a stone floor, but there was also grass with flowers and trees. To top it all off, the entire room was open to the sky with the stars twinkling like mad above.

The woman wore a dress that looked as if someone had taken water and woven it into fabric, and she smiled sweetly at the man in his robes that were every imaginable shade of green. They spoke, but it was too faint for Holly to hear. They laughed and strolled around, the air filling with wonderment and magic.

As time passed, she began to notice that the pair was not alone; there were several animals present as well. A storm-grey owl sat perched on the back of a chair, a fox curled up on the cushion with what appeared to be some sort of cat. A stag ate grass without concern, even though a silverish-brown wolf laid not three metres away, and a coyote sauntered about nearby. A giant, black dog that was the size of a small pony ran around and barked happily, while chasing a red-gold bird. A serpent crawled across the ground and slithered up the front leg of the dog when it paused to rest, looping loosely around its neck. There were others in the background, but Holly didn't catch more than glimpse of them, though she distinctly recalled seeing a penguin, a tiger, and a racoon.

All in all, the dream was magical.

By the morning, it was far from forgotten but was pushed to the back of her mind as she put her remaining things in her trunk and packed it into the car. The ride to the station was a quiet one, the Dursleys still too afraid to speak to, or even in front of, Holly. However, she did learn that the main reason for the trip was not to take her to the train station, even though it was on the way. Instead, it was to remove the pig's tail, apparently a parting gift from Hagrid, which Dudley now had firmly attached to his incredibly large bottom.

Within minutes of arriving at the station, a happy and appreciative Holly was safely seated in an empty compartment on the train. Thankfully, Alé had thought to warn her about the entrance to the

platform as Hagrid had barely even mentioned the platform number, much less the fact that she had to pass through a wall to get on it.

The only slight mishap she had had was when one of the adults on the platform, a chubby and redheaded woman, had yelled at Holly for using her wand to levitate her trunk on the train. The woman had not believed her for a minute when she had stated that she hadn't known about the rules governing underage magic because she was a first-year. The woman had replied that no first-year could perform such a spell, although Holly had learned the Levitation charm, *Wingardium Leviosa*, from one of her books. The bossy woman had made her twin sons lift the trunk from the spot it had fallen when she had grabbed the girl and onto the train. She had then departed after a few more words of censure, leaving in her wake a calm-faced but inwardly furious Holly.

The compartment door opened, and Holly was shaken out of her daydream as a redheaded boy entered, the girl immediately identifying him as one of the demanding woman's brood. The boy looked suspiciously at her, staring at the Defence book in Holly's hands.

After a few seconds, he asked, "Can I sit here? Everywhere else is full."

Holly nodded, and he plopped down across from her. He was about to speak once more when the compartment door open again, and the twins from earlier came inside.

"Hey, Ron," one stated to the boy, but his eyes then drifted to Holly. "Oh, hello." Both he and his twin smiled at her. "Sorry about our mum. She can be a bit pushy sometimes. I'm George Weasley, by the way, and this is my twin Fred. That's my younger brother, Ron." He pointed to the younger redhead, who seemed to have dirt on the side of his nose.

Holly smiled genuinely at him; she had noticed earlier that the minds of both he and his twin had a nice feel to them, sincere but mischievous.

"It's fine; I should have known better. Thank you for helping me with my trunk, by the way." She came to her feet and nodded to them. "I'm Holly Potter."

The eyes of all three Weasleys widened, but only Ron's travelled to her forehead, searching for her scar. Fred and George simply shrugged it off and chatted for a few minutes before leaving to find their friend Lee Jordan.

"Are you really Holly Potter?" Ron blurted out after a moment.

"Yes," she stated evenly, not likely the turn his thoughts had taken.

"And have you really got the – you know..." he asked, glancing to her forehead.

Holly nodded and shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"Can I see?" Ron moved to the edge of his seat, as if he was about to view a great delight, but he was, of course, denied his treat when the girl shook her head.

"Oh." He seemed to cast his mind about for another topic, and his eyes landed on the tome in her hand. "So what book are you reading?"

Holly continued to chat politely with Ron for an hour, and though he was quite nice and he had a somewhat pleasant mental presence, the girl felt uncomfortable. Ron kept staring at her forehead, attempting to catch a glimpse of her scar, and he persisted in looking at her in awe. She also had the distinct feeling that Ron had purposely sought her out to sit with on his mother's orders, but Holly put that down to Madam Weasley wanting to know if she performed any more magic.

Eventually, her tolerance level for his odd behaviour reaching its limit, Holly decided to seek out Blaise and made to leave the compartment.

"I'm going to look for a friend," she informed him civilly. Even though she didn't want to, her manners forced her to add, "would you like to come with me?"

Inwardly, she hoped that he wouldn't.

Ron glanced at her in surprise, obviously believing that the Girl-Who-Lived would not be the type for such pleasantries. "Who are you going to see?" he asked with suspicion.

"Blaise Zabini. I met his cousin and him in Diagon Alley when I went for my school things," Holly responded evenly. She was about to mention meeting Draco as well when the boy interrupted her.

"I've never heard of him."

Ron thought for a moment, and Holly could tell that he was attempting to place the name. He spoke curiously, but she sensed that what he meant was that he knew of no connection between Zabini and You-Know-Who; this thought of course confused her greatly, but she attributed it to a dislike similar to Hagrid's.

"So do you want to come?" Holly prompted, silently cursing the Dursleys for ingraining such courteous behaviour into her.

"Nah, you go on," Ron finally responded with a grin. "I think I'll go look for Fred and George later."

Holly nodded and then hurriedly excused herself from the compartment. In the corridor, she mentally stretched out her senses, searching and finding Blaise's presence two cars over. She walked to the end of the car and was about to enter the next one when the door suddenly flew open.

A bushy-haired girl marched through followed by a chubby, round-faced boy. The girl seemed so intent on her journey that she nearly barrelled straight into Holly.

"Oh, sorry," the girl stated, glancing at Holly. "We're looking for a toad; Neville's lost his." She indicated the boy, whom seemed to be too shy to say anything. "Have you seen one?"

"No, sorry," Holly responded and was about to continue on her way when a sudden idea occurred to her. "Why don't you get one of the

older students to summon it?" She distinctly remembered a reference to the Summoning charm in one of her books.

Both the girl and boy looked stunned by the suggestion.

"Why didn't I think of that?" the other girl murmured more to herself than to the other two. "I've read all about them." She went on, dragging the chubby boy behind her.

Holly stared after the unusual pair for a moment before continuing down the train. After having to dodge several other students in the corridor, the girl made it to the car housing both Blaise and Draco. She stretched out her senses and moved to a compartment that was toward the middle. She hesitated for a moment, hoping that they indeed wanted to see her again, before finally knocking on the door.

"Come in," a voice the girl recognised to be Draco's called.

She entered and was surprised by the enormous grins of both Blaise and Draco when they saw her.

"Splendid, Holly." Draco stated happily, "We were just about to go looking for you." He stood and offered her his hand. "I believe that we were interrupted last time."

The girl glanced at him speculatively and, noting his continuing sincerity, took his hand. Instantly, she received a magical jolt, her skin feeling electrified. It was much like the one she had received from Blaise when they had first shaken hands, and it continued to linger long after Draco had let go.

"A pleasure," Holly said finally. She smiled and received an even bigger one in return.

She glanced at the other boy. "Hello, Blaise. It is good to see you again."

"It's good to see you, too. I was hoping to see you here," Blaise answered; he motioned to the others in the compartment, who stood up. "These are our friends. Millicent 'call me Milli' Bulstrode. Pansy

Parkinson. Theodore 'Theo' Nott. Gavin Darklighter." He pointed to each of them in turn. "And this, my friends, is Holly Potter."

Both Draco and Blaise looked smug, while the others were quite stunned. Everyone's eyes were fixed on Holly, but none of them looked to her forehead.

Within seconds the dark-skinned boy, Gavin, recovered and stepped forward. "Good to make your acquaintance." He shook her hand as well.

The other three were quick to follow along.

Holly felt several more magical tingles, one from each of them. Nevertheless, none of them were as strong as her reactions to Blaise and Draco, though the ones from Theo and Milli lasted for several minutes. The tingles actually made her feel a bit light-headed. But she couldn't really be sure if it was a lasting effect from the blond boy, something resulting from each of the others, or a combination thereof.

After several minutes of introductions everyone returned to their seats, Holly sitting between Blaise and Pansy. The entire group was soon deeply involved in a discussion of the upcoming Sorting, all knowing how it was to be done, and of Hogwarts in general. This, of course, had lead to a chat about the other students, mostly siblings or other first-years, that each of them knew.

"Well, my sister's older and has already left school, so she won't be with us. But my neighbour, Mandy, will be in our year," Milli informed the group, who mostly already knew.

The entire conversation was for Holly's sake.

"And my cousin, Anthony, as well," Pansy added, smiling at Holly. "He's quite nice looking as is his brother, Andrew. He's a fifth-year Ravenclaw." She whispered, conspiratorially, "Milli fancies him!" Her brown eyes travelled to the pug-like, but still sort of pretty in an odd way, girl and back to Holly.

"Both of my sisters are younger," Blaise continued an earlier line of the conversation. "The oldest won't be in school with us until our sixth

year, but I have several cousins that will be here; you've already met Alé."

Draco joined the conversation, "Greg Goyle and Vincent Crabbe will be in our year also." He smirked faintly. "They may look dumb, but it's mostly an act. They're surprisingly intelligent... when they want to be."

The others smiled with mock surprise.

"Really, you could have fooled me," Blaise interrupted with a laugh, causing Draco to glare at him.

"Well, both of my siblings are in Slytherin," Theo contributed, trying to forestall any arguments. "Tabitha's a seventh-year, and Tim's a fourth. Both are older and a bit annoying," he commented, rolling his eyes with mock exasperation. "My cousins Daphne Greengrass and Susan Bones will be in our year though."

"I'm the oldest of my family. One of my mates is here though. He's in Gryffindor but is a second-year. Xander Harris," Gavin added. "My girlfriend, Jackie Jordan, will be in our year," he stated the comment with a hint of happiness, finishing the talk of other students.

From there the discussion drifted to other topics, only to be interrupted by the arrival of the food trolley. When the cart arrived the group immediately descended on the trolley witch, buying some of everything and passing all the sweets around, giving Holly her first taste of magical candy. The girl was pleasantly surprised by all of the sweets, especially the Chocolate Frogs. She also started her very own card collection, having a total of twenty-seven, including the famous Dumbledore and Merlin himself, by the time all of the candies were eaten.

Afterwards, the ride went on with more chatter, but the friends had broken off into separate conversations. Holly and Blaise spoke about the various books they had read, while Draco and Gavin launched into a discussion about Quidditch, pausing to explain the game to Holly. Pansy, Theo, and Milli gossiped about the new magical musical group the Weird Sisters.

Eventually, being close to the school, the group was forced to change into their robes. When the train finally stopped, they all hopped off, and Holly was immediately set upon by an excited Hagrid, who wanted to know if she had enjoyed the train ride. Thankfully, Blaise managed to free her from the gentle giant's grasp, and Hagrid finally led the first-years to the lake. The pair found an empty boat and climbed inside, quickly joined by Draco and Milli. Soon, all four were treated to their very first glimpse of the famous, and infamous, Hogwarts Castle. They sat in stunned silence as they took in the rising towers, the cobbled walkways, and the numerous shining windows.

Within minutes, they were inside the castle and not so patiently waiting for Professor McGonagall, the deputy headmistress, to return. Their wait was briefly interrupted by an assortment of ghosts, who seemed to be having some sort of argument, but they were spared the gory details by the reappearance of the professor.

The first-years trailed behind McGonagall into the Great Hall and up to a grubby looking hat that was sitting on a three-legged stool: the Sorting Hat.

Holly's attention was diverted from the enchanted ceiling, which she had read about in Hogwarts: A History but was not going to brag about like the bushy-haired girl she had seen earlier. She focused on the Hat as a hole in the brim appeared.

*"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,
But don't judge on what you see,
I'll eat myself if you can find
A smarter hat than me.*

*You can keep your bowlers black,
Your top hats sleek and tall,
For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat,
And I can cap them all.*

*There's nothing hidden in your head
The Sorting Hat can't see,
So try me on, and I will tell you
Where you ought to be.*

You might belong in Gryffindor,
Where dwell the brave at heart,
Their daring, nerve, and chivalry
Set Gryffindors apart;

You might belong in Hufflepuff,
Where they are just and loyal,
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true
And unafraid of toil;

Or yet in wise, old Ravenclaw,
If you've a ready mind,
Where those of wit and learning,
Will always find their kind;

Or perhaps in Slytherin
You'll make your real friends,
Those cunning folk use any means
To achieve their ends.

So put me on! Don't be afraid!
And don't get in a flap!
You're in safe hands (though I have none)
For I'm a Thinking Cap!"

The names of the students were quickly called, Holly noting several familiar ones like Bones, Susan, who was Theo's cousin and went to Hufflepuff. There was also Jordan, Jacqueline, who was Gavin's girlfriend and was sorted into Ravenclaw. Soon, it was Holly's turn.

"Potter, Holly."

The girl noticed that the normally stern McGonagall had an odd look of anticipation on her face as she stated the name. Further, Holly noted that most of the teachers seemed to sit up straighter in their chairs, the headmaster actually staring at her in interest.

She steadfastly ignored the whispering that had erupted when her name was called and strode up to the Hat. However, she paused as she neared and offered it a short bow; she wanted to make a good impression, after all. She completed the journey and sat lightly on the

stool as a somewhat confused McGonagall dropped the Hat on her head.

"Hmm," said a small voice in her mind, which she knew to be the Sorting Hat. "Difficult, very difficult. But wait... what is this?"

Holly felt a light and gentle probe in her mind, instantly stiffening on the stool.

"Ah, I see that you have a great gift, youngling."

She was in near panic; she hadn't wanted anyone to know of her mental abilities, but the Hat quickly alleviated her terror.

"Fear not, young one. I will not tell anyone, you have my bonded word on that. It's for you to decide whom to trust with this knowledge." It hesitated in its words but after a second continued, "Mind Mages are a rare and wondrous thing. Use your power wisely," it whispered the last with a hint of finality. "Now, back to your Sorting."

If the Hat could have smiled, it would have in that moment.

Holly felt it rummage around in her head, but there was no pain from the action; the Hat was very gentle about it.

"Plenty of courage, I see. And... Great Maker! What a mind, quick and clever!" The Hat's mental voice was practically singing with joy and enthusiasm. "I haven't had someone like you in quite a time," it added happily, sensing her bemusement. "There's talent – oh my goodness, yes – and a nice thirst to prove yourself. Now, that's interesting... So where shall I put you?"

The earlier words of its song resounded in Holly's head: *You'll make your real friends.*

'Slytherin,' Holly thought, 'the friends comment was about Slytherin.' An image of Draco Malfoy being sorted into Slytherin emerged.

"Hmm... yes, I did say that you would make your real friends there." The Hat quieted for a moment, clearly thinking.

"Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it's all in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the path to greatness." The Hat again paused after its little speech.

Within her mind, Holly heard a slight mental sigh.

"Evil is coming young one; I know that it is." The Hat again sighed, but there was a spark of hope in its next words. "You would be their light in the storm... but you would also be their darkness... not suffocating but soothing. Yes, I most definitely know where to put you. If we want to win, better be..."

"SLYTHERIN!"

Holly beamed at the words, not that anyone could really tell with it still covering most of her face. She gently removed the Sorting Hat, sitting it on the stool. She once more bowed before hurrying to the Slytherin table.

Belatedly, Holly noticed that she was receiving the loudest cheer by far with a few of the older Slytherin boys losing all sense of decorum and shouting, "We got Potter." The girl also noted the surprised and shocked expression on McGonagall's face, which was quickly removed as the professor once more schooled her features, and Holly simply shrugged to herself, noticing the happy expression on Draco's face as she sat next to her new friend.

"Brilliant," Draco stated, taking her hand in congratulations. "I had hoped that we would be in the same House. Now, we only need Blaise." He indicated the boy, who was last in line. "Well, let's hope for the best."

"Yes," she said with excitement. "I truly hope he's in Slytherin as well." She smiled.

The rest of the Slytherin table had sat quietly through the exchange, waiting for their chance to give their introductions or congratulations. Holly traded quick words with her earlier acquaintances from the train: Pansy, Milli, Theo, as well as their friends Greg, Vince, and Daphne who had all made it into Slytherin. She also met two other

first-year girls: Autumn Summers, who she met after the girl was sorted, and Cynthia Moon.

Yet, Holly was sad to find that both Gavin and his girlfriend, Jacqueline, weren't in Slytherin but in Ravenclaw instead with Pansy's cousin, Anthony, and Milli's friend, Mandy. Though, she didn't have much time to brood for she was also introduced to a few older students.

There was Solaris Morningstar, the fifth-year Prefect, along with Marcus Flint, the sixth-year Quidditch Captain. Then, there was Cordelia Capulet, another fifth-year and distant cousin of Draco, and Titania Shackbolt, a fourth-year and Chaser on the Quidditch team. Finally, there was Sophia Dolohov, a third-year friend of Alé.

The rest of the introductions to Holly's new Housemates were brought to a halt as her attention was once more on the Sorting proceedings. It was Blaise's turn to be sorted.

Her gaze focused intently on her friend as he nervously walked up the short steps and placed the Sorting Hat on his head. She, and undoubtedly his cousin Alé, waited with baited breath as the seconds passed and the Hat deliberated Blaise's fate.

The seconds stretched into a minute and almost into two when the Hat shouted in triumph, "SLYTHERIN!"

Blaise heaved a heavy sigh of relief, removed the Hat, and went to join his new House. He smoothly slid into place next to Holly, casting a quick smile and receiving one in return.

"I was scared that the Hat would never choose," he stated with a slight chuckle. "It couldn't decide which House would be best, kept going on about one forever."

"Well, how did it decide?" Draco asked from his spot across the table. His silvery eyes were filled with curiosity.

Blaise merely smirked again, his eyes looking intently at each of his friends and lingering the longest on Holly.

The others didn't have a chance to pester him for an answer because the food chose that moment to magically arrive. Holly had never seen such a varying assortment of dishes, not even at the Dursleys, and was quite pleased to be able to sample several things she had never tried before, as well as some of her favourites. She was just helping herself to a jacket potato when a ghost in what appeared to be formal robes with silvery blood on them floated next to her.

"Greetings, Holly Potter. I am Baron Decius de Machiavelli, though many here know me as the Bloody Baron," the ghost introduced himself elegantly in a smooth but commanding voice, adding the last part with a smirk. "I was rather surprised when you bowed to the Sorting Hat; might I inquire as to why?" he asked easily.

Holly gazed at the ghost in surprise; she had not thought that such an act would cause a stir.

"I was simply... being polite, sir," she replied, tilting her head to look straight into his misty eyes.

The ghostly Baron smiled mysteriously. "Indeed?"

He offered her a short bow, which she returned, before floating off for places unknown.

"Hmm, it seems as though the Baron has taken an interest in you, Holly," Titania Shacklebolt commented after the ghost had departed. "And I can see why." She gazed at Holly appraisingly. "You're an unusual one."

She let the comment hang and returned to her dinner, casting another glance in Holly's direction.

They spent the rest of the meal with happy chatter and a few more introductions to their Housemates. Half-way through Alé stopped by to first congratulate Blaise, stating that she was in fact happy he wasn't in her House as he would most likely have driven her mad within a week, and second to mockingly warn Sophia about her cousin and his friends.

“They’re a hand-full I tell you, deadly quick and clever. Love mischief. They’re probably set the dorm on fire or charm everyone’s hair pink for a prank,” Alé pretended to whisper to her friend.

“Well,” Sophia responded, also in a mock-whisper, “they can’t really be that bad. As long as they don’t follow in the Weasley twins footsteps, we should be fine.”

“I don’t know about that, Sophie,” Alé warned with false horror. “What if Fred and George see them as potential protégés and take them under-wing?” She rolled her eyes and chuckled at the thought. “Just imagine what they could do then!”

After several more minutes of banter, Alé returned to her table, just missing the sudden burning in Holly’s scar which almost brought her hands to her forehead.

“Ouch,” she whispered more to herself than to her tablemates, but the others still turned to look at her. “I accidentally poked myself,” she stated quickly, hoping to alleviate their interest.

Her Housemates seemed to accept that answer and returned to their meals; Holly quickly glanced around, attempting to discover the source of her burning scar. Her eyes rapidly landed on Quirrell and then a dark, greasy man: Professor Snape. He, according to Titania, was their Head of House.

Both of the men were gazing at Holly, studying her keenly. Her emerald eyes stared straight back at them. Both, noting her interest, looked away.

Soon afterwards, it was time for the yearly announcements. Holly could understand why several people laughed at the dire pronouncement that the third-floor corridor would lead to a swift death, as Dumbledore presented the idea comically, but neither she nor many of the Slytherins laughed; apparently, her House took death threats seriously. Dumbledore made a few more announcements before leading the school on a jubilant (AN: note my sarcasm) rendition of the school’s song, which everyone sang to a different tune with the Weasley twins finishing last to a very slow funeral march.

"Ah, music," the headmaster stated, wiping his eyes. "A magic beyond all that we do here! And now, bedtime. Off you trot!"

The journey to the Slytherin dorms was surprisingly short, given the rather convoluted and confusing path they took. Holly walked the entire way with Blaise, the two attempting and most likely failing to memorise the route there. Eventually, the first-years and the sixth-year Prefect who was leading them arrived at a portrait of an elegantly dressed couple sitting by a lake, gazing at a cloudless painted sky. The lady of the pair glanced at the students and smiled as she saw the children.

"Password, please," she asked gently, her voice smooth and cultured.

"*Aeternitas*," the Prefect responded. "Did you have a nice summer, Elizabeth?" she inquired.

"Why, yes, I did. Francis and I visited the portrait of Andalusia the entire time. I hope you had a nice time as well." She curtsied, and the portrait swung open, revealing an archway entrance.

"Welcome to Slytherin," both she and her male companion called loudly.

The Prefect guided the others into the Slytherin Common Room, the first-years inhaling sharply at the sight. The room was quite large and was coloured in various shades of green, predominately the main House colour, but there were lighter ones as well. There were outlines of silver on the walls and most of the furniture, and oddly enough, there were also hints of dark blue and gold visible.

On the right wall was a large, dark-marble fireplace with a semi-circle of very comfortable looking armchairs and a settee. There were also several portraits and what Holly assumed were magical windows, which depicted a night-time view of the lake and the forest at ground-level.

The female Prefect indicated that the first-years were to sit in the circle of armchairs, while the other Prefects lined up next to the fireplace. The sixth-year, Alexia, if Holly remembered her name correctly, smiled at them as they sat down.

“Hello first-years, and welcome to Slytherin. I am sure that your time here will be well spent. I just wanted to say a few words.”

Her statement elicited a chuckle from the other Prefects.

“Okay, maybe more than a few words about our House.” She again grinned, looking over the younger students. “As you have probably already guessed, this is the Slytherin Dormitory. Our dorm is a rather unusual one, given that the other Houses room in Towers. Part of it, the Common Room and a few other rooms, is completely underground. The rest, the actual dorms, is actually located inside of the cliff, so all of your rooms will have a nice view.”

Again, there were a few sniggers and grins.

“Get on with it, Alex.” Solaris, the male fifth-year Prefect, stated. He smirked wickedly.

“Fine, fine,” Alexia acquiesced with a mocking bow. “I just wanted them to have a little information about their new home. Now then, the entrance we took you through is the primary one; there’s a secondary,” she indicated a bare stretch of wall on the far side of the room, “which uses the same password. We’ll show you its outside entrance tomorrow. All this week, we will also be taking you to your various classes and showing you around the castle. We’ll show you a few secret passages to help you on your way and how to **not** become lost in the dungeons.” She turned and glanced at her fellow Prefects, motioning the seventh-year girl to join her. “You’re up next, Sandra.”

The older girl winked and sauntered up to speak. “I just wanted a quick word about class work and classes in general. First-years are required to take eight classes: Astronomy, Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, Defence Against the Dark Arts, History, Herbology, and Flying. If you need any help in Astronomy, Charms, Herbology, Flying, or Potions the professors will be happy to help,” she announced evenly. “Our Head of House, Professor Snape, teaches Potions, so I expect you all do try your best there. For History, I would recommend that you don’t go to Binns. Instead, come to either Titus Livy – he’s a fourth-year but really knows his stuff – or to me, Cassandra Troy.” She curtsied with a chuckle. “For Defence you could go to Quirrell but expect to be forced to wade through a great deal of stuttering.”

Here, all of the Prefects sniggered, a few of them trying to turn it into a cough.

Sandra just ignored them entirely. “Just ask anyone who is older for help; you’re better off that way. Finally, for Transfiguration you could always go to McGonagall, but she’s Head of Gryffindor and generally does not like Slytherins. So unless you want stern glares instead of answers, come see Alexia here.” Cassandra indicated her friend. “Solaris or James.” She pointed to the two males Prefects in order.

Cassandra began to move away but quickly turned back around. “One last thing, if you have any questions – whether it’s for homework or anything else – my fellow Prefects or any of the upper-year students will be happy to help. However, I would advise you to remember that the fifth-years and seventh-years have the OWLs and NEWTs to study for and will be very busy.” She grimaced at the thought.

“Also, please remember that we can’t fight your battles for you. However,” she stated emphatically, looking at the first-years intently, “we will support you and help you in anyway we can. You just have to ask.” She smiled and returned to the rest of the older students.

James Bode, the seventh-year Prefect and Head Boy, stepped forward. “Thank you, Sandra. Now there are several things you need to know about our House itself.” He paused as if gathering his thoughts.

“We have a bit of a bad reputation. We are thought of as dark, dreadful... and a whole slew of other negative things. While we might actually be all of this, there are several things that we are not.” His voice began to rise in volume as he continued, “We are not all Death Eaters. We’re not all a Muggle-haters nor do we despise Muggleborns. In fact, there are actually quite a number of Muggleborns in this House, as many as there are in any of the others.” James looked at each and every one of the first-years.

“You can think and believe whatever you want, but you will not bring your prejudice into this House. You will, under no circumstances, insult any member of Slytherin because of their blood. If we catch you doing this, and do not think that we won’t, you will most definitely not

like the punishment.” He again paused, inhaling sharply. “Further, you’re not to say such things to members of the other Houses. We don’t need to add to our already dubious reputation. While we we’ll not reprimand you in front of the other students, do not think for a minute that you will get away with it.” His deep blue eyes burning with emotion, he turned and stalked back to the other Prefects.

Marcus Flint stepped forward next, surprising Holly with his articulate speech. “I know that this is a lot to take in, but it is important that you know about the House situation, especially the Muggleborns. Any students who are either Muggleborn or are unfamiliar with our world will meet here, in the Common Room, in the morning at seven. We’ll set up meetings to help introduce you to our world and our culture. Also, we’ll be scheduling some tutoring since students from magical families will have a bit of a head start.”

He grinned faintly and went on, “On another note, I have to say that much of our somewhat dubious status is based on the fact that we’re ambitious and cunning. And, yes, we all are, but this doesn’t mean that we all lust for power. We’re ambitious, but for most of us, that simply means we are goal oriented or wish to succeed in life. We have the drive to use our gifts and be the best that we can be.” Marcus sighed heavily. “Some of us might be Dark, but that does not make us evil.” He shook his head and exhaled.

“Now, I believe that Professor Snape, our head of House, would like to say a few things.”

The towering and somewhat menacing professor stepped from the shadows near the secondary entrance to the Common Room. He caught a few of the first-years by surprise because they had not noticed him earlier.

Marcus inclined his head in greeting and yielded the floor.

“Greetings, my new Slytherins, and welcome to our House,” Professor Snape began, his eyes studying the first-years intently. “I trust that you shall uphold the House dignity and honour. I expect you to behave in a manner befitting your status and station as Slytherins. You will most definitely not like what will happen to you should I discover any rule breaking or **marauding**.” He looked specifically at

Holly, as though he expected her to perform a random act of disobedience then and there.

"I also trust that you shall keep in mind all that you have been told tonight in the coming days and months," he spoke clearly enunciating each syllable. "However, there is one final piece of advice to give, and I most sincerely hope that you remember these words for they are **very important**," he emphasised the last heavily. "Solidarity is not just for Gryffindors. Intelligence is not just for Ravenclaws. Loyalty is not just for Hufflepuffs." Professor Snape's onyx eyes travelled around the room taking in all of the students present, first-year and older alike.

"Now," he stated briskly, "I believe that it is time for bed." He glanced about once last time, his eyes lingering on Holly. Professor Snape turned, his robes swirling around him, and exited through the portrait-guarded entrance.

Everyone sat in silence for a moment before complying; the first-years shuffled over to the ornate archway on the far wall, which led to the dorms. They passed through into a corridor and stopped by the first set of doors directly across the hall from one another.

"Boys to your right and girls to your left," James stated somewhat sleepily, the day apparently beginning to tax him. He opened the right door, motioning all of the other males to follow him.

On the left, Sandra did the same for the girls.

Holly, who was in the middle of the group of girls, followed quickly and passed into the girl's section of the dormitory. The female part of the House was situated on an upward sloping hallway and consisted of eight doors on opposite sides of the corridor with a portrait on the opposing wall. She noticed as she passed into the door marked *First Year* that the nearest picture featured a herd of grazing unicorns, but her attention was quickly turned to what would be her sleeping quarters for the year.

The actual room for the first-years continued the earlier linear environment and the House colour scheme of the dorms with six beds in various shades of green all in a row against the far wall.

Three of which were on the right side, one directly in front of the exit, two on the left, and a door on the left-hand wall, which Holly correctly assumed was the toilet. Windows, which thankfully came with curtains, were on the wall behind the beds.

“As you can see, your trunks have already been brought and are in front of a bed,” Sandra said as the girls shuffled in. “You can switch the order of beds if you want.” She paused to give them a minute to decide, but they were far too tired to really care.

“Right then,” Sandra went on, “the toilet is on the left, and there will be an alcove in there for each of you, so you won’t really have to share.” She smiled gently and backed towards the exit. “Well, that is about it, so goodnight and pleasant dreams.” She backed out and lightly shut the door.

The girls spent next few minutes searching for both their trunks and their beds, Holly discovering that hers was directly in front of the hallway door, situated between Pansy and Daphne.

“Is everyone happy with where they are?” Milli asked after everyone had discovered the sleeping arrangement.

“Well,” Autumn spoke softly and with a great deal of hesitation, “I don’t really want to sleep in the corner.” She indicated her bed next to the wall and furthest from the toilet.

The other girls glanced at her for a moment, obviously deciding what to do, but before anyone else could formulate a reply Holly spoke.

“You can switch with me then.”

She smiled at the other girl, knowing the real reason that she didn’t want to be in the corner. Enclosed spaces didn’t bother her in the least, not after sleeping in a cupboard for a decade, so she had willingly volunteered to switch.

Autumn studied Holly intently before she answered, “Sure.”

She beamed and the two quickly switched, Holly now in the corner and next to Milli with the redhead in the open area by the door.

A few minutes later, Holly was already in bed rapidly becoming sleepy. Her last thoughts as slumber overtook her were about how much Hogwarts, and more specifically Slytherin, seemed like home.

AN: This is not going to be a Snape mentors Holly fic, at least not for a few years. In this story, Snape will be a bastard and stay a bastard for a good length of time. He's a spy and a Death Eater, so he can't suddenly be nice to Holly. He will be mean to her, but it won't really be in front of the other Houses, to them he will appear neutral about her or will just ignore her, and his mistreatment of her will be mostly in private. Further, he despised her father and godfathers; no matter how badly she is treated by her relatives, when Snape finds out he won't suddenly make nice with her. However, he's still her Head of House, so it is his duty to protect her, especially from the other students and teachers. (Author steps off her soapbox.)

Also, on another note, there is a specific reason as to why I made the Slytherin dorms in hall, not Tower, fashion. Also, the portraits in the hall and the way the beds are arranged will be important later on. And I know that I went a little crazy with all the extra OCs and students I added, but I just wanted to emphasise that Holly is not like Harry and will have more than just two friends. Holly will also know and have connections with people from other Houses, like any good Slytherin should.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks!

Chapter Six: Halloween Havoc

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Six: Halloween Havoc

‘She’s a Slytherin.’ The words ran through his mind, blocking out all other thoughts.

‘She is a SLYTHERIN. How did this happen!? I sent Hagrid so that she would be against Slytherin. I asked Molly to talk with her and have Ron befriend her so that she would distrust Slytherin. She was not supposed to be one of them!’ Confusion and doubt filled his mind.

‘The wizarding world expects a Gryffindor saviour or at the very least a Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff... but Slytherin! They’ll throw a fit at the first hint she is anything but what they expect.’

The headmaster of Hogwarts sighed heavily and began to pace back and forth, right then left, around his office. Dumbledore stalked passed the now sleeping portraits of the other headmasters and mistresses. He walked by the sullen and thoroughly unrepentant Sorting Hat, which was now refusing to speak to him as he had yelled at it for placing her in Slytherin. He wandered over to his desk and the perch of Fawkes the phoenix, who was looking at him mournfully.

Dumbledore lowered himself heavily into his chair. He placed his tired and aching head into his hands.

“Am I doing the right thing?” he asked Fawkes suddenly. “Am I truly doing the right thing? If Holly is happy there then shouldn’t that be all that matters?” He shook his head sadly. “I left her to suffer with the Dursleys so the Blood Protection would remain intact. I know that they didn’t love her, that she didn’t have the childhood she should have had. Holly deserves some happiness, no matter how small it may actually be.” He exhaled softly, blue eyes lacking their customary twinkle.

“But I have to do what’s best for everyone. They need to be protected; they need a defender, and I’m not sure a Slytherin will be up to the task.” He sighed and looked at the phoenix again, hoping for an answer. “Am I doing the right thing?”

However, Fawkes did not respond. He merely looked at the headmaster mournfully, knowing that the man was, as they say,

between a rock and a hard place. No matter what he did... someone would have to suffer the consequences.

It was just a matter of whom.

"But she's a Slytherin now," Albus went on, ignoring the lack of response. "I can't change that. She is one now unless she decides to change Houses, but I honestly can't see her doing that. She's far too much like Lily to jump brooms mid-flight. Even if she ends up hating Slytherin, and I have no doubt that she will grow to dislike at least part of it with Severus as her Head of House." Dumbledore hesitated at the mention of his protégé but went on after a moment, "But she will stay there, I just know it." He exhaled very slowly, puffing at his beard and staring at the far wall lost in thought.

"What if she becomes like **him**?" Albus whispered more to himself than to the bird, finally voicing the real reason he despaired. "What if she winds up just like Tom?"

He closed his eyes then, fighting the tears that threatened to come every time he thought of the boy that he had once and still much did love as a son. The very same boy who he had tried to help, to save. Who had never known the depths of his feelings, who he had never told, who he had failed. And who now hated him, who despised him with every fibre of his being.

The tears came with the last thought, and Albus felt a sudden warm weight land on his shoulder. He heard a mournful note, Fawkes agreeing with his sadness. The bird trilled his calming song, and Albus suddenly felt better. He wiped away the tears.

"Thank you, my friend" the headmaster stated, receiving a nod in return. "But what if she does end up like him?"

"We will just have to make sure that she doesn't. Remember, Albus" Fawkes chided, "Slytherin doesn't mean evil and neither does Dark. I see great potential in her."

Dumbledore gazed at the phoenix. "You said the same things about Tom."

Fawkes nodded sadly. "I did, and I stand by what I said. He had the potential to help our world, but something changed that. Something came and took it away from him. Something stole it from him."

He gave the phoenix equivalent of a sigh, still puzzling over the mystery of one he could have sworn would have a much different life.

"We failed that fledgling," the phoenix stated finally, green and gold eyes burning with resolve. "We will not fail this one."

Holly came down from the dorms her first morning at Hogwarts bursting with energy and excitement; she just couldn't wait until class started. Though, first she had to meet in the Common Room to learn about the magical world, and she scanned the room, noticing that Autumn was already there as were Sandra and Theo.

"Good morning," the eldest girl stated as she saw Holly, "I believe that this is it, so we can get started." Sandra smiled as the girl sat in the armchair between the other two first-years. "Now, it would help me if you would tell me how much you know about the magical world."

"Well," Theo began, deciding to go first. "Both of my parents and all of my siblings are magical, but we were raised in the Muggle world. I'm pretty sure that I know a lot, but I still felt it a good idea to come anyway."

Autumn glanced at him before speaking. "I'm the first magical person that I know of in my family. I don't really know anything about all this." She gestured, encompassing the entire room and its occupants.

Sandra nodded in understanding. "I know how you feel. I'm Muggleborn myself." She looked at Holly.

"I don't really know anything either. I was raised to believe I was a Muggle," Holly said very slowly, not wanting to speak anymore about her life at the Dursleys.

"Really?"

Both Sandra and Theo looked surprised. Holly merely nodded.

Sandra considered for a moment. "Only one Muggleborn," she whispered to herself shocked by the revelation. "We usually have at least two or three." She glanced at the three first years, suddenly remembering where she was.

"Oh, sorry. I was side-tracked for a minute. Since there are so few of you this year we can meet in the third study room just down the corridor instead of the Common Room." She pointed to the door that led deeper into the dorms. "The best time for me to meet would probably be on Thursday afternoons at about four. I checked the first year schedule, and you don't have class then, so is that good with everyone?"

She received three nods in reply.

"Right then." She crossed her legs, tapping her foot. "I believe that we can go over a few of the basics before the others join us to head to breakfast."

Sandra spoke to the three Slytherins for a half-hour before the other students started trickling into the Common Room. She touched on various subjects, briefly mentioning the prejudice against Muggleborns among some circles and explaining the term "Mudblood."

Soon enough, the other Slytherins joined them, and they all went to breakfast together, where they received their schedules. Afterwards, the Prefects led the first-years to their first lesson, Charms.

It was taught by the excitable Professor Flitwick. Upon meeting the tiny and eccentric man, Holly knew that she would like him, despite the fact that he annoyingly squeaked and toppled out of sight when he reached her name on the roll.

Things went smoothly the rest of the day with only two small exceptions. The first of these events occurred when Ron Weasley came to speak to Holly just outside the Great Hall before lunch.

The young Gryffindor was in the process of nervously congratulating her on her sorting to Slytherin, an act which surprised Holly, when Draco Malfoy arrived. The blond only sneered and mouthed about

“poor Weasels” before brushing past the redhead, but the damage was already done. Ron turned beet red before quickly moving to his table, ignoring Holly’s call after him

The second incident occurred just after lunch in Holly’s only class that afternoon: Potions. The girl believed that Professor Snape, a snarky and dark man, disliked her. She was proven quite correct.

Although he only glared at her, instead of yelling like he did to that poor Longbottom boy, the teacher did not sneered nearly as much at the other students as he did at Holly. Further, the Potions professor seemed to make it his personal mission to repetitively ask her about ingredients. Thankfully, she had thoroughly read through her text and was prepared for the inquisition, and much to Professor Snape’s annoyance, she answered all the questions correctly.

But unlike the other Slytherins he interrogated, Snape didn’t award her any points. Still, he didn’t take away any either.

Other than those two occurrences, Holly’s first day went rather well, and it became increasingly better throughout as she had yet to lose herself on her way to and from class.

It wasn’t mid-afternoon of Holly’s second day that she actually became lost in the castle when she had decided to go to the loo instead of return to the Common Room. She made it there with little problem, using the directions Alex had given yesterday, but Holly had no idea how to return to the dungeons. She wandered around helpless for almost an hour, trying to find her way back to a recognisable part of the castle without much success, when she had felt familiar presences the next corridor over.

Holly had just turned the corner, hoping to run into someone who could show her back to the dorms, when she quite literally ran into George Weasley.

“Oh, sorry,” Holly stammered as Fred Weasley helped her to her feet. “I really should watch where I am going.” Her arm was still tingling from her contact with him, but she shrugged it off.

“No worries, dear,” George stated amicably. “We weren’t watching either.”

Holly nodded before gazing up at the pair. “Er... well, you wouldn’t know the way back to the Great Hall, would you?” she asked, naming a place she knew she could easily retrace her steps from.

“What... oh, yeah.”

Fred and George looked slightly nervous and exchanged a quick glance; they apparently weren’t paying much attention to her last question.

“Look, Holly,” Fred began, “We know that you don’t really know us--”

--And we know that we’re Gryffindors,” George continued, “and that you’re a Slytherin--”

--But... well,” Fred trailed off and looked to his twin.

“What we are trying to say is that we would still like to be your friend,” George finished somewhat lamely, stating but **not really stating** what he was thinking.

Holly looked at him with puzzlement before she breathed a silently sigh of relief, thinking that they were about to ask her something else.

“Sure.”

The twins smiled.

“Brilliant,” Fred stated. “We don’t really care for Slytherin and Gryffindor thing much anyway. We were almost Slytherins ourselves--”

“You two were almost in Slytherin?” Holly asked incredulously, interrupting him.

“Yeah, the Hat said that we were both sneaky and mischievous. The perfect students for Slytherin,” Fred put in.

At Holly's questioning glance, George continued, "But the both of us wanted to be in Gryffindor instead since that was where Percy was; we just had to be in the same House so we could prank him."

Both he and his twin laughed.

"What about Ron?" Holly asked. "Did the Hat want to put him there as well?" She thought back to her last interaction with the redhead outside the Great Hall. "He did congratulate me for being in Slytherin, so I thought that maybe he could have gone there also."

"Ron did that?" George questioned with surprise, clearly impressed by his youngest brother. "Wow, I didn't think he had it in him."

"Me either," Fred said bemusedly. "You see, he used to be pretty anti-Slytherin. I'm surprised by this abrupt change of heart." He narrowed his eyes, clearly suspicious. "But anyway," he went on, remembering Holly's earlier question, "oh, sorry. Yes, we know the way to the Great Hall. We can take you there."

He smiled and offered his arm.

The girl stared at him for a moment, and after receiving twin nods of encouragement, she very hesitatingly looped her arm through his, tingling at the contact. On her other side, George followed his brother's gesture. The three made their way down the hall, Holly trembling slightly due to the prolonged physical contact, which she wasn't used to. Thus far in the magical world, only Blaise had touched her and that was only fleetingly.

Holly repressed a shudder as she thought back to her times with the Dursleys. She quickly cast her mind about, searching for another thought. She grinned as she remembered something the twins had mentioned earlier.

"So you two are into pranks, are you? Well, my friend Blaise..."

It was several weeks into the school term, and Holly was feeling more and more at home as time had passed. She had made several friends both inside and outside of Slytherin, including the twins. There

were Milli, who was quickly becoming her best female friend, and Theo, who helped her understand several aspects of the magical world she had trouble grasping. Then, there was Gavin the Ravenclaw, who was practically a Slytherin as he all but lived in the boys' dorm. She was also on friendly terms with the rest of the Slytherin first-years with one sort of exception, but the group had not yet yielded universal friendship status.

Further, Holly had continued her letters to Remus, receiving several in return. Additionally, she had made inroads into learning about her parents from another source, Hagrid. The man had invited both Blaise and she to tea her first Friday, and ever since, the day had been reserved for their get-togethers.

All in all, Holly was happy; she had friends for the first time in her life. But at the same time, she was losing two she wished could be her friends.

The first, Draco Malfoy, had started out on friendly terms with Holly, but the situation quickly deteriorated due to his increasingly big-headed and snobbish behaviour. Not only did the blond prance around the Common Room like he owned it, but he also was starting a reign of insults against the other Houses. Malfoy had already been dubbed the "Slytherin Prince" by most of the student population, including a few of his older and quite peeved Housemates. None were fond of his arrogant behaviour nor his increasing cuts and slights against those with less than pure blood.

Holly still tolerated his presence and was making inroads into hopefully reining in his arrogance, but her attempts seemed to be failing regardless of how much time she spent with him. Or rather, how much time he spent following her around.

Ron Weasley, on the other hand, remained an allusive mystery. Holly initially had misgivings about him, but after spending time with the twins and learning a little about both he and his family, she decided that she would seek Ron out.

This was easier said than done because after the incident outside the Great Hall, Ron had not approached Holly again. In fact, he seemed

to be avoiding her. Clearly, he felt that he was either not welcome or not wanted... or possibly both.

However, this situation changed on the day of the first flying lesson of Gryffindor and Slytherin.

The lesson started out normally enough. The children stood in front of their brooms and said, "UP!" Holly's jumped excitedly into her hand on the first try. Blaise's almost took his head off in its exuberance to be in the air, which caused the nearby Theo to laugh heartily. They then mounted their brooms and pushed off.

But this is where the trouble began.

One Gryffindor, the ever troubled Neville Longbottom, pushed off too hard and ended up hovering several metres above the ground. The poor boy then lost his grip and plummeted to the ground, landing with a great thwack. The instructor, as well as several other students, Holly and Blaise included, rushed over to the boy as he clutched his clearly broken wrist. Madam Hooch sighed, rolled her eyes, and pronounced that she was taking him to the Hospital Wing.

Holly glanced at Longbottom in silent sympathy as he was led away; she knew exactly how it felt to have her wrist broken, and it was not a pleasant experience.

Green eyes flicked around, noting that all the Gryffindors were still clustered in a loose circle near where Longbottom had landed and that the Slytherins were gathered a short distance away. She casually noticed that Draco was staring at a spot on the ground a few metres from him.

Confused, she let her eyes follow his. There was a small red sphere lying on the ground where Longbottom had been earlier. Her gaze flickered back to Malfoy, and she knew in that instant that he was planning to steal the... whatever it was.

Holly came to a quick decision and walked over to the ball. She bent down and palmed it, depositing it into her robes. She glanced around, noting that Malfoy was staring at her, while Blaise looked on with interest. But no one else was the wiser.

The girl casually moved to her broom, Malfoy's eyes watching her. She waited for her opportunity to come, and sure enough, it did as Blaise unexpectedly engaged Draco in a discussion about Quidditch.

Holly smiled at her friend's distraction and hurried over to the Gryffindors.

"Ron," she greeted calmly.

"Er... hello," the redhead answered, clearly surprised by her presence.

The Slytherin smiled. "Hello." She hesitated before reaching into her robes and withdrawing the red orb. "Look, I found this over there, and I think that it belongs to Lon-Neville. Will you return it to him?"

"Sure." Ron took the red ball and looked up at her just as she began to move away. "Hey, Holly," he stated nervously.

She turned to glance at him. "Yes?"

"Well... er... about what I said... or... tried to say earlier... good job with Slytherin... and er... if you don't mind that I am a Gryffindor... would you like to be--"

Holly sensed what he was trying to say.

"Friends?" She nodded. "I would love to be friends." She smiled.

"Right then," Ron added happily.

"Fine then," the Slytherin echoed before moving to join Blaise, whose conversation with Malfoy was just ending. She winked at the caramel-skinned boy as she took her place beside him.

"I saw what you did," Blaise whispered suddenly as she moved next to him. "With the Remembrall. I figured that you were going to give it to one of the Gryffindors to return to Longbottom, but with the way Malfoy was staring at you... well, you'd never get the chance."

"Thanks." Holly grinned wider, sneaking a glance at him.

Blaise reached over and patted her hand, noticing but not mentioning her tremble. "What are friends for," he joked.

McGonagall appeared suddenly, ending the rest of his statement and surprising several students. She grumpily stated that Madam Hooch was otherwise indisposed and that the lesson was over, hurriedly shoos them off to their dorms.

'Well, it doesn't look like there would be much flying to today,' Holly thought to herself with a hint of sarcasm as she headed to the Common Room with Blaise. 'I'll guess that I will just have to try some other time.'

Less than a week later, she did try flying, the incident having unforeseen consequences.

"The youngest Seeker in a century," Blaise stated with obvious excitement.

"That's what Flint told me," Holly said rather bemusedly, confused by her entire situation.

"And that's not else," Milli inserted, her dark-green eyes blazing, "he said that she's a natural, that he hasn't seen anyone this good since Charlie Weasley graduated."

Holly blushed at the compliment, thinking back to the incident that had started all this mess. She had been outside Saturday morning just days after the failed flying lesson and had wandered over to the Quidditch pitch when she had noticed the school broom cupboard. Even days later the girl was not entirely sure why she did it, but she had retrieved one of the brooms and had rather spontaneously decided to take it for a go.

The sheer freedom and her unsurpassable joy at flying had led Holly to whirl and twirl through the air for almost an hour. Unfortunately, her antics had been noticed by a passing professor as he was returning from a stroll around the castle. Fortunately, however, Flitwick had a soft spot for her, one which she secretly suspected that it had something to do with her mother. The tiny teacher hadn't even reprimanded her for flying. Instead, he had been completely amazed,

transfixed by her incredible skill on a broom and even more so when she told him that it was only her second time flying.

“But I mean... how did this happen?” Blaise asked impatiently, interrupting Holly’s reverie.

“Well, apparently, Flitwick was quite excited about the incident and mentioned something to Flint. He was intrigued enough to come find me, especially since Higgs said he didn’t really want to play this year because he has to study for his NEWTs, so Flint asked me to fly for him,” Holly answered, dazed by her good fortune.

“Really? When was this?” Blaise inquired, trying to remember when Holly had had the time to secretly try out for the Quidditch team.

“About two hours ago,” Milli responded instead. “When you, Theo, and Gavin were up in the dorms. He came up to Holly in the Common Room and then brought her directly to the pitch.” The girl carried on smugly, “She’s just now getting back. He took one look at her on a broom and immediately made her a member of the team. He said that she had great talent.”

In the background, Holly flushed red.

Blaise inclined his head in understanding. “That’s brilliant. So when is your first practice?”

Holly thought for a moment. “It should be on Wednesday. I’m not going to practice with the team yet.” She gazed at Blaise speculatively. “And don’t tell anybody about it. Flint told me to keep it a secret; he wants to surprise Gryffindor in the first match of the season.”

Both Blaise and Milli laughed.

“Yeah, can you imagine the look on the twins’ faces when they find out that they’ll be playing you?” he asked. “Ha, this is going to be so good.”

Although Holly’s good luck with flying and the Quidditch team led to unforeseen consequences, she had been forced to all but tip-toe

around Professor Snape afterwards. The dark and greasy man had originally seemed to detest her, but Holly had revised that opinion after she was elevated to Seeker status.

Apparently, Snape loathed her.

He glared at her, snarked and snapped at her, especially in Potions, which she seemed to have a talent for. He generally just tried to degrade her. Snape seemingly just wanted her to be miserable, even if he hurt Slytherin House. In fact, Holly was the only Slytherin in Potions that actually lost points. Still, she generally only lost two to five, whereas Gryffindor lost about twenty every lesson because of Longbottom and his ever increasing ability to melt cauldrons.

While Snape generally did not show his feelings around the students from the other Houses, he had no trouble doing so in front of the other Slytherins or professors. Whenever he was in Common Room, which thankfully wasn't often, he sought out Holly to berate her. He sniped at the small first-year in front of his own colleagues, often stating that she had misbehaved. Obviously, what he really meant was she that existed, and therefore, it was his right to treat her as though she was Slytherin rubbish.

Unfortunately, Holly's problem with the Potions master was not her only Slytherin related ones.

Draco Malfoy had continued and escalated his reign of terror against any and all non-Slytherin students, especially those that were poor, Muggleborn, or Gryffindor. The blond really hated Ron as he was guilty on two counts. Not to mention poor Neville Longbottom, who just seemed to possess no self-esteem whatsoever.

Holly, and to an extent Blaise and surprisingly Theo, had seethed at Draco's behaviour. They actually asked him to tone it down and to remember that their House's reputation was on the line, but the boy had simply shrugged off their objections, increasing his antics and actually becoming more malicious.

The other Slytherins had voiced several complaints about Draco's actions and the Prefects had actually taken him aside to speak with him, but nothing changed. Draco kept up his taunting.

However, things eventually came to a head five weeks into school.

Holly and Theo were walking back to the Common Room, searching for Blaise and Gavin, when an irate Draco had stormed up to them.

"I can't believe that they let that sort of people in this school!" the blond ranted, positively fuming. "That bushy-haired Mudblood thinks that she is better than us because she is the first in her line to be magical. I'll bet..." he trailed off when he caught the look on Holly's face.

"What did you say?" she asked, and though her voice was calm, it belied her growing anger.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Holly. But it's that Granger. She's so infuriating. She always has to be right. She's just a filthy Mudblood--"

At dinner time, Draco was still sporting a reddened hand-print on his face, which if measured would have fit the size and shape of Holly Potter's right hand perfectly. She had slapped him so hard that he had actually seen stars before she marched off to the Common Room, leaving a dazed Draco and a triumphant Theo in her wake.

Sometime later, while the girl was in the library researching an interesting spell that Professor Flitwick had mentioned in passing, Blaise approached his friend.

"So what's this between you and Malfoy?" he asked gently, fearing that he too would feel her wrath.

Holly sighed and looked up from her search of the *Fidelius* charm.

"He was spouting off about Muggleborns, except that wasn't exactly what he called them." She gave him a significant look, which easily conveyed her meaning. "In case he has forgotten, my mother's a Muggleborn." She scowled, her eyes blazing. "And Crabbe and Goyle aren't much better; they follow him around like lost puppies, but at least, they don't actually participate in Malfoy's shenanigans." Holly actually growled then, setting her book down.

"It's just too much. First, he harasses the Gryffindors. Second, he makes fun of Ron for being poor. Then, he picks on Longbottom, who looks like he has lived a rather hard life. And now, this! It's too much, Blaise. He has to stop. He's making half the school hate him. It's only the fifth week of school, and most of the other Houses already despise him. And not only that, but he's making them hate all Slytherins!" she finished heatedly.

"Calm down, Holly." He placed his hand on her trembling shoulder and rubbed soothing circles, noting that she flinched. "I wasn't going to say anything about your mum or any Muggleborn for that matter. I have always thought that particular prejudice ludicrous at best, and the rest of my family agrees with me." He smiled and winked at his friend. "Though, I think Malfoy might want to change his own opinion on the particular subject."

Holly laughed. "Really?"

"Yes, really." Blaise smirked mischievously. "I overheard Flint talking with one of the female Prefects about it. She was wondering how to punish Malfoy, but he thought that the mark you left on his face was punishment enough. Apparently, it's going to leave a bruise for a while, and Madam Pomfrey refused to treat it after Theo let it slip that Malfoy was insulting Muggleborns," Blaise added the last bit in an undertone. He conveniently left out the part where Nott had purposely told the nurse about the blond's behaviour because he too thought it was out of line.

"Flint did mention that he might have to let you try your hand at Beater instead of Seeker," Blaise put in after a second. "He said that anyone who could hit Malfoy that hard could probably whack a Bludger like the Weasley twins."

Holly snorted. "I can actually picture him saying that."

"I don't have to. I was there." Blaise grinned, happy that his friend was now at ease. He removed his hand from her shoulder, noting that she unconsciously relaxed.

"And as far as Longbottom and the rest of the Gryffindors go... well, I think that they are beginning to realise that it's not Slytherins in

general; it's just Malfoy and his goons that seem to be insane." He exhaled heavily and moved to seat himself next to his friend. "I think that Draco simply has this childish need to bully someone, and they just make prime targets. The Gryffindors because of their House, Ron because of his family, and Longbottom because he won't stand up for himself. Crabbe and Goyle go along with it because they have been friends with him for so long and--"

"And what?"

Blaise hesitated, looking around the library before leaning in. "Well, all three of their parents were said to be Death Eaters, followers of the Dark Lord," he whispered softly. "And not only that, they were supposedly in his inner circle."

Holly's eyes widened in shock. "What?" she murmured back, thankfully remembering to keep her voice down. "But... I mean--"

"Oh, they were forced into it. He threatened their families and used *Imperius*... a mind-control curse on them," Blaise hastily corrected at her confused look. "And even though he's gone, their parents are still frightened that he'll return and punish them for associating with Muggleborns." He paused as a pair of Ravenclaws stopped at a nearby bookshelf.

His companion sat quietly, absorbing the information. Hagrid had mentioned that there would be Death Eater's children at school with her, and he had implied that the Malfoys were somehow involved. But she hadn't imagined it would be this bad!

"As for Weasley and Longbottom," Blaise said after the two older students had left, "their families were opposed to You-Know-Who throughout the war. Malfoy knows this, so he attacks them. He's afraid that his family's position will be held against them by either the Dark Lord's enemies or You-Know-Who himself if he ever returns."

Holly nodded thoughtfully. "How do you know all this?" she asked after a moment.

"My older cousins. Also, Draco and I are related," he replied easily before picking the topic up again. "Anyway, a number of Slytherin –

and quite a few Ravenclaw – families were forced into severing the Dark Lord. He wanted the allegiance of his old House, and when they wouldn't support him, he started murdering them off. All of them. Parents and children." Blaise shivered, Holly echoing the action.

"The others were scared; most caved to save their children and spouses," he said softly. "The people who went to the Ministry for help were killed off as well. There were spies who ratted them out, but usually, they were tortured brutally before they were killed. The Dark Lord doesn't like betrayers, and that's what he saw them as: traitors to his cause. If you were not with him, you were automatically against him. That meant he had the right to murder your entire family." He sighed heavily, blowing his hair from his face.

"Eventually people stopped refusing all together and simply acquiesced to his demands."

"That's terrible." She looked at Blaise hesitantly. "Did they approach your family?"

The caramel-skinned boy managed a small, ironic smile. "Yes, but we fled to our ancestral home in Italy. A few others left the country also, but most didn't have that option. They had nowhere else to go."

"Oh."

Both sat in stunned silence for a few minutes before it was broken by Holly.

"If Draco's parents are truly afraid, they could just tell him to avoid Muggleborns all together," Holly said, eyes still wide with lingering surprise.

The boy nodded. "I know that, and you know that... as does Draco. Still, he seems to possess the need to bully them at every turn. He could just be over-compensating."

Holly smirked faintly. "Do you think there's a way for us to help him get rid of this need, short of beating it out of him? Like I said, he could just avoid them."

"I don't know. I think that we might just have to wait it out." Blaise shrugged. "Though, I think a few... er... reminders would not hurt."

The days and weeks after that passed in relative peace and with a large helping of homework. Holly and Autumn continued to be tutored in wizarding culture, though Theo realised that he didn't really need it so he stopped coming. Sandra still helped them, though she often brought in other students to assist because of her increasingly difficult schedule.

Yet, even with her tutoring, the girl still spent the majority of her time with Blaise, usually doing schoolwork or reading. Occasionally, they would join their friends, both Slytherin and otherwise, in other pursuits. While Draco and his two lackeys were often in the group, Holly and they rarely interacted. The girl because she knew that she was right and was unwilling to apologise or yield in her position. Draco because his pride refused to allow him to back down.

Halloween dawned bright, clear, and surprisingly warm the first year of her magical education, not that she really noticed. She was in a huffy mood that morning, having overheard Draco and his goon squad saying nasty things about Neville Longbottom. Her mood only seemed to deteriorate as the anniversary of her parents' deaths wore on. By dinnertime, even Blaise was receiving only one syllable answers to his questions.

The two entered the Great Hall, passing a pair of Gryffindor girls by the doors. Holly heard a snippet of "...she's been crying in the toilet all day. That Ronald Weasley is such a prat..." before she swept passed the Indian girl and her friend, Lavender, if she remembered correctly. The Slytherins duo sat quietly at their table next to Theo and Gavin, who seemed to prefer their table to Ravenclaw's, and helped themselves to the food.

Holly barely ate anything. She simply picked at her meal and idly watched the bats flutter about the ceiling.

The meal itself would have been pleasant under different circumstances with its various odd dishes and interesting entertainments, but for some odd reason, Holly felt increasingly

uneasy, agitation that had nothing to do with the anniversary of her elevation to Girl-Who-Lived status or Draco's bullying. She just felt anxious, as though something she dreaded was about to happen, not that she could think of anything in particular that fit the description. It did not help matters that her scar kept prickling every few minutes or that she was rapidly developing a headache.

After a time, deciding that she had had enough, she rose from the table.

Blaise turned to look at her, a question on his face.

"I'm just going to the loo." But what she truly meant was, "I am going to sneak back to the dorms."

Dark-brown eyes studied her before he nodded. "Right. Would you like me to go with you? I can wait outside. Don't forget that the Samhain celebration is supposed to start tonight, so we don't want to miss out." He placed a hand on her shoulder, noticing that she trembled more than normal.

"No, I will be perfectly fine," Holly answered evenly, hazily remembering that Flint and Alex had mentioned a celebration in the dorms.

She had a vague idea what it was supposed to be about, but due to her slight aversion to the Common Room as of late, courtesy of her strained relations with Malfoy, she had missed out on learning what it was to entail. All she knew was that it had something to do with the wizarding holiday Samhain and respecting the dearly departed.

Blaise looked like he didn't quite believe her but acquiesced. "Right then." His eyes followed her as she stood and exited the Great Hall, knowing that she really just wanted to get away from the celebration.

Feeling guilty for lying, Holly hesitated outside the doors to the Great Hall before heading to the girls' toilet; at least this way, she could honestly say that she went before returning to the Common Room. She nipped inside and gazed at the stalls before walking to the sinks. Holly set her hands on the side of one, gazing at her reflection. She closed her eyes and stretched out her senses, only to suddenly whirl

around when she detected another presence, which hadn't noticed before.

She silently berated herself for her inattention.

"Hello. Who's there?"

A sniffle was her only reply before she heard a door unlock and saw it open. A bushy-haired girl walked out and over to one of the sinks, avoiding Holly's eye.

"Hello," Holly said carefully. "Hermione, right?"

The other girl merely nodded, finally glancing at her.

Something stirred at the Slytherin's memory.

"Is it true that you were in there because of something Ron Weasley said?" Holly asked gently, looking into her Hermione's brown eyes.

Sniffle.

"Yes, he said that I'm nothing but a know-it-all and that I don't have any friends." A tear streaked down her face. "And I don't... I don't belong here." Her voice picked up in volume as she carried on, "I was so excited when I received my letter, but it was just a mistake."

Hermione burst into tears once more.

Holly looked at the girl in alarm. "No, that's not true. Of course, you belong here. The Sorting Hat wouldn't have sorted you if you didn't." She tried to approach the problem logically, thinking that this particular argument would be best for the Gryffindor, who was rumoured to be very bookish.

The Slytherin continued to talk with the other girl for a few minutes, attempting to alleviate her sadness and convince her that she did indeed belong. In the background, Holly belatedly noticed a pale, silvery girl also listening to her, but she didn't mention the ghost to the Gryffindor.

Holly had just finished calming the distraught Hermione when she heard a dull pounding in the distance. She stretched out her mind, only to ram into a slow and quite alien presence, which was quickly approaching the loo.

‘This is not good,’ Holly thought to herself, wondering what in the world to do.

However, she didn’t have long to think as the toilet door opened, and an overpowering stench filled the room. A troll had just walked into the loo; a very **big** troll with a very **large** club had just walked into the loo.

The following minutes were fraught with confusion as she pushed Hermione behind her and brought her wand to her hand. She felt more presences fast approaching, both of them familiar, but Holly had no time to focus on them as the troll swung his club toward the two girls. She ducked, pushing Hermione further back.

Holly was not exactly certain what followed because all she knew was that apparently she, Blaise, and Ron somehow managed to levitate the troll’s club onto his head using the very same spell Flitwick had taught them earlier that day, the same one Holly used on her trunk. For several moments afterwards, the four first-years gaped at the troll quite stunned by the entire incident.

Holly finally found her wits after a moment. She blinked at the troll before turning to Blaise and Ron.

“What are you doing here?”

“Quirrell said that there was a troll in the dungeons, and I thought you might try to return to the Common Room,” Blaise wheezed, fighting to find his breath after apparently running down the corridor to find Holly.

“Troll and Quirrell? Blaise, what are you talking about?” she asked incredulously.

“Just now in the Great Hall... Quirrell said that there was a troll loose in the dungeons,” the boy huffed, trying to regain his breath. “I thought that you’d probably sneak back to the Common Room,

instead of returning to dinner, and you wouldn't have known. I grabbed Ron; we came to find you," he finished in a rush.

Ron nodded his head in agreement and was about to speak when Holly sensed three more people fast approaching. She turned, and the door to the toilet flew open.

"By Circe! What is going on here?" a shocked voice asked.

McGonagall, Snape, and Quirrell had just arrived on the scene.

What happened next was sure to go down in Hogwarts' history books. Quirrell clutched his chest at the sight of the troll and sat on a toilet when his legs gave out. Hermione Granger lied to a teacher, telling McGonagall that Holly had seen her pursuing after the troll and that Blaise and Ron had followed to bring her back. McGonagall awarded twenty points to Slytherin for helping a fellow student and deducted another ten from Gryffindor, which was balanced out by the ten Ron earned. Snape seemed as though he was proud of Blaise and managed to glare at Holly at the same time.

Yes, it was the stuff of Hogwarts' legends. Too bad that almost nobody would ever know the truth. At least, not for a while.

The first-years fled quickly down the corridor after being released back to their respective Common Rooms, almost running in their hurry to get away. They stop just short of the crossways that would lead the Slytherins to the dungeons and the Gryffindors to their Tower.

Hermione looked at the other three and smiled. "Thanks for saving me."

Holly nodded. "You're welcome."

Blaise grinned. "Thanks to you for covering for us."

Ron blushed and stammered, "Er... yeah... and sorry for... earlier."

Hermione beamed and nodded. She turned to Holly and Blaise.

“You know,” she stated, “with the exception of Malfoy, Slytherins aren’t really that bad.”

And that is how Hermione “the know-it-all” Granger came to be friends with Holly and Blaise and later on casual acquaintances with the other Slytherin first-years.

For some strange reason, Draco Malfoy didn’t seem very happy with the arrangement.

The incident at Halloween also led to what would probably become one of the most famous and bizarre friendships in Hogwarts history, that of Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley. While Hermione, Holly, and Blaise did actually become rather good friends after the Halloween event, the bushy-haired girl’s best mate seemed to be the illustrious Ron Weasley himself, much to the amusement of everyone else.

Hermione also made it her mission to befriend Neville Longbottom, much to the confusion of almost everyone else, including Fred and George. Not that the three Gryffindor first-years truly seemed to care.

AN: First, I mentioned that Theo Nott was raised in the Muggle world, even though his uncle was a known Death Eater. The explanation is that his parents fled to the Muggle world to escape the Dark Lord because they were among those Voldemort threatened. This will come into play later in the series.

Also, I have had quite a number of complaints about the Slytherin “friendliness” and McGonagall, all of which I will address now. First, the Slytherins are trying to impress Holly, so they will tend to be nicer to her. Second, in canon the Serpents were only mean to Harry after he became a Gryffindor and after he had insulted one of their Housemates, Draco. Although Malfoy was a prat in the beginning, there were no mentions of the Slytherins going out of their way to harass Harry before that. Third, this is a Slytherin-is-not-evil-but-merely-misunderstood story, so they’ll probably tend to be nice to Holly. That isn’t even mentioning the fact that she is their Housemate. Fourth, while McGonagall tries to be fair, she does have a bias against Slytherin, and it is something that she really cannot help. She

is a Gryffindor, so she will tend not to like them in general just because of that, even though she does try to overcome her dislike. Finally, the story is from the POV of the Serpents, so they'll tend not to like McGonagall in return and will, therefore, see her as biased.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks!

Chapter Seven: Holly's Wild Ride

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Seven: Holly's Wild Ride

"Oh, he's just so bloody infuriating," Hermione commented heatedly to Holly and her companions as she came to their table in the library on the day before the first Quidditch match. She sat down rather heavily in the chair across from Blaise.

"Malfoy keeps picking on Gryffindors, Ron and Neville in particular. A bunch of us have been complaining to McGonagall, asking her to do something about it, but she can't unless she catches him and his two side-kicks in the act." She exhaled menacingly, blowing her frizzy hair from her face.

"I bet it will stop pretty soon," Holly responded with a sly smile, "especially if he keeps picking at Ron." She and Blaise exchanged a knowing glance.

"Why do you say that?" Gavin asked, looking up from his Defence homework.

"Since Fred and George will beat the stuffing out of him if he doesn't," Blaise answered with a grin. "Either that or they'll start a prank war."

Everyone laughed at the thought.

"Can you imagine what a dandy Malfoy would look like if he were all funny coloured and feathered?" Theo asked between laughs, referring to an incident earlier in the week where the twins had accidentally turned one of the Hufflepuff fourth-years into a purple, dancing pegasus.

Hermione actually smirked. "Maybe he'll sing and dance as well. Oh, he could do show-tunes."

The others were prevented from further comment as a rather irate Ron Weasley stomped over to their table.

"Hello, Ron," Blaise stated pleasantly. "And how are you on this fine day?"

The only reply he received was an angry mumble as Ron dropped his bag heavily onto the table and threw himself into the seat across from Theo.

“That good, eh?” Blaise continued like he had received an actual response, “And what has you in such a splendid mood?”

Ron growled out something that none of the others really heard. He flung his bag open, pulling out a random book.

“I take it that you ran into Malfoy then?” Holly asked, inserting herself in the conversation.

Ron shook his head, ripping open his Charms text.

Gavin questioned with surprise, “You didn’t?”

“No,” the redhead ground out, also fishing out a quill and some parchment. He put the tip on the parchment, only to growl in frustration when he realised that there was no ink.

Hermione looked at him in confusion. “Well, what’s the matter then?”

“Was it Percy?” Theo asked, thinking about Ron’s irritating older brother.

“No.”

“Then what’s the problem?” Holly enquired with slight annoyance.

“Wood,” Ron replied simply, his anger beginning to lessen.

Blaise looked stumped. “Come again?”

“It’s Wood... Oliver Wood. He’s the Quidditch Captain, you know. He took me aside earlier to ask me if the rumours about Holly as the new Seeker are true,” Ron responded with a matter-of-fact voice, glancing at the Slytherin girl. “They’re true, aren’t they?”

Holly and Blaise exchanged another look but didn’t answer.

Ron fingered his ink bottle. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“Well, what’s the problem then?” Hermione queried, turning back to her homework.

“The problem?” Ron repeated incredulously. “I’ll tell you what the problem is. **He wanted me to spy on the Slytherin team!**”

Hermione looked up in surprise. “I’m sure that he didn’t mean it that way, Ronald. He just asked since you’re friends with Holly.”

“I know that’s why he asked me,” Ron interrupted. “He knows that we’re friends. He believed that I would know if the rumours were true, but that’s not the point. He asked when he shouldn’t have, and then, he asked me to question Holly and Blaise about the Slytherin team.”

“He did?” Holly asked.

“Yes! He came straight out and asked.” Ron raked a hand through his hair. “I told him that I didn’t know and that I wasn’t going to harass the Slytherins for him.”

“And what did he do?” Blaise inquired, tilting his head to the side.

Ron sheepishly looked at the tabletop. “Well, he sorta stormed off in a huff after that. He was muttering that we needed every advantage we could get, even if it meant spying on the other teams, and about how the other members of the House needed to get in the Quidditch spirit.”

Theo laughed. “As if you aren’t the most Quidditch-minded individual on the planet already, but thanks for sticking up for us, though. I don’t think that many other people would.”

“Yes, thank you,” Holly stated truthfully.

Ron blushed. “Yeah, well... it’s nothing. Wood was just being... Wood. He’s a bit obsessed really. Fred and George complain about him all the time. He does know his stuff, though,” the redhead added in a wistful voice.

“But still,” Blaise inserted, “thanks. It means a lot.”

The other Slytherins nodded in agreement.

Ron flushed even more. "Right then..." He hesitated before adding, "Well, I hope you understand it when I say that I hope you do well tomorrow but don't catch the Snitch." He grinned at Holly.

Holly smiled back.

That night, she was a bundle of nerves. Holly had gone to bed at the same time as the other girls, only to lie there for hours, staring at her canopy.

When she did finally fall asleep, she dreamed of a young man: a teenager with the deepest blue eyes she had ever seen. They were a dark colour, almost purple-black in their intensity. He was sitting in an empty Slytherin Common Room, reading out of one book and writing in another. He smirked and sneered and occasionally gave a true smile as he worked, but every now and then, he sat back and read through what he had written, absentmindedly twirling his wand.

The following morning, Holly pondered the dream as she dressed, wondering who the boy was and, more importantly, why she was dreaming about him. But for the life of her, she couldn't remember ever meeting someone who looked like that, so she dismissed it as simply her imagination run amuck.

A short time later, Holly sat down to breakfast at the Slytherin table, flanked on all sides by her classmates, sans Draco and his cronies. While she did notice their behaviour, the girl didn't make a comment on it; she was far too nervous about the upcoming Quidditch match to think about anything else. Holly simply sat quietly and poked at her plateful of toast, not really eating anything, despite Blaise's unhappy glances.

The other Slytherins repeatedly exchanged knowing looks and tried to engage her in conversation or attempted to make her actually eat. However, it wasn't until Milli, Pansy, and Daphne started a discussion on Gringotts that Holly actually joined in.

As Milli flipped through her copy of the *Dailey Prophet*, Pansy asked, "Does it have any new information on the break-in at Gringotts a few months ago? I have been wondering if they have any new leads."

"No," Milli replied as she flipped the page, turning to the Crime Reports section, "not that I have seen."

Across from them, Holly suddenly looked up from her plate of barely-eaten toast.

"Break-in at Gringotts?"

"Yes," Daphne responded as she turned away from her conversation with Autumn. "There was a break-in at the end of July. The Aurors... er... our equivalent of police," she clarified at Holly's confused look. "Anyway, they think that it was the work of Dark wizards or witches."

"Typical," Theo interrupted, joining the discussion, "they always blame it on the Dark. Just once, I'd like to see them say it was Light witches and wizards unknown."

The other Slytherins nodded.

Milli smiled ironically as she looked over her paper at Holly. "Still, they don't really know who did it. They don't even know if anything was stolen."

Pansy added, setting down her fork, "According to the Goblins, the vault was visited earlier the same day. But they wouldn't know if the owner took everything out, or if they even took anything at all. Only the owner would, but they won't say whose vault it was or what was in it." She paused to take a sip of water. "It makes me think that something dangerous or really valuable was in the vault. Something that the owner doesn't want associated with them."

Holly considered the implications. "Did they at least say which vault it was?"

Milli put her paper on the table. "713," she stated matter-of-factly.

"You remember which vault?" Blaise questioned from Holly's side.

"My grandmother's birthday, July 13th. It helped me remember." The heavy-set witch shrugged.

"So when was it robbed again?" Holly asked, a strange idea stirring in the back of her head. "You said the end of July, but what day exactly?"

Milli thought for a moment but shook her head. "Do either of you remember?" She turned to Daphne and Pansy.

"Hm, I believe it was the 31st," Daphne said after a moment. "It was the day before my mum took me school shopping." She glanced at Holly. "Why?"

Emerald eyes narrowed in concentration. "That is when Hagrid took me to Diagon Alley. He took something from a vault that day; I think it was the same one that was robbed."

The other first-years looked shocked by Holly's pronouncement.

"Do you think this has anything to do with the three-headed dog on the third floor?" Gavin asked suddenly, coming into the conversation.

They stared at him in confusion.

"What?" Pansy questioned, looking at him like he had grown another head.

"The three-headed dog in the forbidden corridor," Theo responded nonchalantly. "Gavin and I overheard some of the older Slytherins talking about it. They had gone to have a look since it is supposed to be, you know, **forbidden**."

"Yeah," the Ravenclaw interjected with a grin, sipping his morning tea. "They said that it was bloody huge."

"And you never thought to tell any of us before?" Pansy asked with irritation, her face reddening slightly.

"Honestly, I haven't really thought much of it." Gavin shrugged, setting his tea down. "I thought that maybe it was one of Hagrid's pets

or something, that Dumbledore was doing a crazy experiment of some sort.”

“Yeah, maybe he was seeing how many students would ignore his warning and get eaten by the dog,” Pansy stated sarcastically, rolling her eyes. She mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like, “Idiot Ravenclaws. Can’t see anything beyond their own books” before she turned back to her breakfast.

The conversation dwindled then, each of the students returning to their own meals and thinking over the implications. The only interruptions were the occasionally murmurs between the children and when Hermione, Ron, and Neville stopped by very briefly to wish Holly luck. Ron once more asserting that he hoped she did well but didn’t catch the Snitch.

Around ten-thirty, Holly and the rest of the team headed down to the Quidditch pitch and into the Slytherin changing room. There, they received a pep talk from Marcus Flint, the captain.

“Okay, men and women,” he began, looking at the six other players. “I know you’ve probably heard this before but... play your best and your hardest. We want to win. But if we don’t, at least give Gryffindor a go for their Galleons.” He smirked then, face filled with anticipation.

Marcus turned to the two other Chasers. “Pucey, Shackbolt, I want you to do what you did last year. **Pass a lot,**” he emphasised the sentence. “Remember that Wood is partially colour blind, so if you keep the Quaffle close to your body, he might not be able to tell that it’s there.”

Flint looked to the Beaters. “Bole, Derrick, try to keep the Bludgers away from the Weasley twins. The Maker knows that they’re tough.” He looked at the rather large boy and girl intently. “Keep them from hitting our Seeker.”

The captain finally moved to Holly. “Potter, just try to catch the Snitch. The Gryffindor Seeker, Jones, is near-sighted and won’t admit it. He doesn’t even wear glasses. If the Snitch is far away, he might not notice it immediately.”

Marcus smiled with anticipation, surveying his team. "Right, people; let's move out."

The Slytherin team went out on the field to the triumphant cheer of their House and a few Ravenclaws like Gavin. They mounted their brooms, watching as Flint and Wood shook hands with hawk-eyed Madam Hooch looking on. The two boys shook fiercely, and it seemed as though Flint was trying to break Wood's fingers, but Holly could understand the reasoning behind the action.

According to Theo, who had heard it from his older brother, there was a great deal of animosity between the two. Most of it stemmed from the fact that Marcus had broken Wood's nose after an unfortunate comment had been made about his sister looking like a troll's backside. She was sure that the fact that Wood was also the Gryffindor Captain did not help matters.

Madam Hooch quickly separated the two after it became apparent that they were trying to injure one another and lectured both teams on her desire for a "good, clean game."

The match started soon afterwards. Holly found herself circling the pitch, listening to the commentary by the announcer, Lee Jordan, brother of Jacqueline Jordan and friend of the Weasley twins.

"And the Quaffle is immediately taken by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor. What an excellent Chaser that girl is and rather attractive, too--" Lee said.

"JORDAN!" an irate McGonagall shouted from nearby.

"Sorry, Professor."

The girl shook her head at his antics and searched near the stands. Unexpectedly, she spied all of her Slytherin friends plus Gavin, and Holly had to fight a blush. They had created a banner: *Potter for Minister*, which featured a serpent with a Snitch. It was undoubtedly drawn by Milli since she was good at drawing and magically flashed green and silver, leading Holly to wonder who had charmed it.

Shaking her head forcefully and casting one more look, Holly resumed her search for the Snitch. After a few moments, she spotted it by Adrian Pucey and took off after it. She was in hot pursuit and was within metres when the Gryffindor Seeker finally noticed the Snitch and quickly joined the chase.

The thing flew swiftly across the pitch, rapidly approaching the Gryffindor goal posts, the two Seekers in gaining on it.

Holly inched closer, the little, golden ball just beyond her fingers when...

WHAM!

A rage-filled roar rippled across the Slytherin section of the stands. Oliver Wood had left his goal posts to block Holly.

Her broom spun off course, the girl holding on for dear life.

Madam Hooch called a foul on Gryffindor and ordered a free shot for the Serpents, but in all the confusion, the Snitch had disappeared.

After the penalty shot, which Flint put away easily, the score was now fifty to ten in favour of Slytherin. Holly flew around once more, searching for the Snitch and occasionally listening to Lee's commentary to learn the score.

Unexpectedly, her broom gave a violent lurch and began to climb.

Higher and higher, she rose, her broom attempting to buck her off the entire time. After several breathless moments, the other members of her team, as well as the Weasley twins, noticed her broom's odd behaviour. As Flint hurriedly tried to call a time out, Adrian Pucey and Titania Shacklebolt flew near her, attempting to pull her on their brooms, but hers simply jumped higher. The Weasley twins fell back and circled underneath, hoping to catch her when... if she fell.

In the chaos, Wood had grabbed the Quaffle and was yelling at his Chasers to take it and score. The three female Gryffindors ignored him, hanging back to watch the spectacle. The Slytherin Beaters exchanged a look and whacked both Bludgers at Wood, hitting him in

the stomach and the head, finally shutting him up. Madam Hooch whistled repeatedly, attempting to regain control of the match, but no one seemed to be listening. Lee Jordan vehemently questioned what was going on, using several foul words, but McGonagall was too entranced in what was happening to bother correcting him.

In the stands below, Holly's friends watched in fear.

On one side of the field, Blaise suddenly glanced at Professor Snape, hoping that his Head of House had noticed and was even then taking steps to help. He saw the man muttering what looked to be a counter-curse, also noting that Professor Quirrell appeared to be doing the same thing. Or perhaps he was actually cursing Holly.

It had to be him since Blaise couldn't imagine Snape cursing someone in his own House.

The boy grabbed the closest person to him, Milli, and pointed. "Look," he whispered fiercely, "he's cursing Holly. Come on, we have to do something."

The two took off, moving towards Quirrell.

On the other side of the field, Hermione had also noticed the two professors, but she had come to a far different conclusion. She ran through the stands, intent on stopping Professor Snape.

The three first-years met in the middle of the stands, each taking out their professor of choice. Blaise and Milli knocked Quirrell from his seat, while Hermione set Snape on fire.

High above them, Holly regained her seat on her broom but plummeted to the ground.

Fifty... forty... thirty... twenty... ten... one metre above the ground Holly suddenly pulled up on her broom with one hand. She lost her grip and rolled onto the grass.

Dazedly, she regained her feet, and with great shock, she held the Snitch high in the air above her head.

“Merlin’s beard,” she heard Lee Jordan announce, “Holly Potter has got the Snitch. Slytherin wins.”

Lee sounded so disappointed when he said it that she actually felt bad for him. Apparently, he had really wanted Gryffindor to win.

However, Holly’s sympathy was short lived because in the next instant she found herself swimming in a sea of silver and green; the other Slytherin players were surrounding her.

“Potter, are you okay?” Flint demanded as he rushed towards her, grabbing her by the shoulders. He quickly looked over his Seeker, and seeing she was fine, he moved to another topic.

“That was brilliant, Potter!” Marcus yelled over the noise. “Wonderful catch. I knew you could do it.” Already, he could see visions of the Quidditch cup dancing in his head.

Holly was met by similar questions and exclamations from her other team-mates.

After several minutes, having finally responded to everyone, they began to move off. The girl breathed a heavily sigh of relief, but she instantly stiffened and whirled around as she felt two more presences approaching quickly. Her eyes only had time to register two red and gold blobs descending from the sky before she found herself with a face full of robe.

Holly had finally gotten rid of her team, only to be accosted by Fred and George Weasley.

She hurriedly shooed the overly dramatic twins off of her, fighting the urge to wince the entire time.

“Hey, Fred and George,” she stated after a moment.

“Hey, yourself,” Fred replied sternly. “And what exactly do you think you were doing during the match?”

“Yeah,” George quickly agreed.

She sighed. "It wasn't intentional. My broom just went berserk; it wasn't my fault."

Holly shifted her eyes to the side so that she wouldn't have to see their incredulous looks. But unexpectedly, she spied something, someone standing nearby along the edge of the field.

Draco Malfoy was watching the whole exchange.

She looked at him carefully, but her attention was once more turned to the twins as George lightly touched her shoulder.

"Look," he began.

"We believe you," Fred continued.

George inserted, "It's just that--"

"--you scared us--"

"--after you dove--"

"--we thought that you hit the ground," they finished together.

Holly gazed at them. "I'm sorry," she said, unsure of what else to say.

Never before had anyone been so concerned with her welfare. No one, including the Dursleys, had ever really cared if she lived or died.

They nodded sombrely and clapped her on the shoulder; she tried not to recoil.

Suddenly, they both grinned.

"Great catch, by the way," George stated unexpectedly.

"Yeah, smashing job," Fred assured her.

"If only you had been in Gryffindor," they said together. "We could use a Seeker like you." The twins leaned in and whispered conspiratorially, "Jones's rubbish as a player. He's only on the team because he's Wood's cousin and nobody else is any good either."

Holly had to fight a smile at their antics, but she sobered once more. She glanced behind the twins at the fast approaching Gryffindor Trio.

“Look, Fred, George,” she said, eyes drifting once more to Draco, “could you go distract your brother, Hermione, and Neville for a minute? There’s someone I have to speak to first.”

The twins nodded and moved off to prevent the three Gryffindors, who had made it all the way to the field from their original position at the top of the stands, from accosting Holly. She, in turn, moved to the side of the field towards Malfoy.

Holly approached him cautiously, stopping a few feet away. “Draco,” she stated in greeting.

“Holly,” he replied warily. A shadow of something crossed his face, but it was gone before she could even begin to decipher it.

The two stood in uncomfortable silence for a moment, both unsure of what to say. Finally, the girl opened her mouth and was about to speak when she was interrupted.

“Good game,” he said simply.

Another moment passed in silence. Holly, deciding that was all he wanted to say, began to move off, but she stopped when she heard him call out.

“Holly, look... I... well,” Draco hesitated, not meeting her eye. “Well, I am glad you’re all right,” he stated finally. He looked as though he wanted to say something else, but the arrival of the rest of the Slytherin first-years stayed his action.

Blaise reached her first. “Holly!” he yelled excitedly, taking her by the shoulders. “You’re okay?”

Holly nodded, trying not to cringe away. She was about to speak but was once more interrupted by the arrival of Theo, Gavin, and Pansy.

“Oy, Holly!” Theo shouted breathlessly, coming up to her. “How are you?” he questioned, further distracting her from Malfoy.

Next to him, Gavin hovered nervously.

“How do you think she is, Nott?” Milli asked with exasperation, joining the group. She marched straight up to the other girl and cupped the dazed Seeker’s face in her hands. “Don’t ever do that to us again, you hear me. You scared us to death!”

From the side, Pansy nodded her agreement. Cynthia, Autumn, and Daphne rushed over as well, joining the ever growing pile of students, which now included a number of Holly’s non-Slytherin friends.

Blaise smirked and attempted to shoo Milli off of his best friend. “I don’t think that Holly will ever attempt that again. Will you, Hols?” he asked gently.

“No,” she affirmed.

“Good.” Blaise winked.

Unexpectedly, he wrapped his arms around her in an impromptu hug. “I’ve got something to tell you later,” he whispered in her ear.

Holly nodded, wincing from the contact and trying to relax her very stiff body.

Blaise noticed but didn’t comment. He pulled back and wrapped an arm around her shoulder, noticing her shy away once more. Blaise started to lead her off the Quidditch field.

“I don’t think any of us could survive a repeat performance,” he murmured in her ear, tightening his grip.

“Least of all me,” she whispered back, unconsciously moving closer to him.

Blaise chuckled dryly and nodded, leading her back to the castle.

As she allowed him to guide her, Holly scanned the crowd, looking for Draco. She quickly noticed his signature platinum-blond hair, seeing him standing quietly to the side,

He watched as she went passed with a very strange expression on his face, and noting her glance, Draco nodded but made no attempt to follow.

The crowd quickly passed him by.

She looked over her shoulder one last time as the others ushered her back to the castle.

It wasn't an apology, but it was a start.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks!

Chapter Eight: A Holly, Jolly Christmas

Thanks to *Hobbit-Tabby* for the beta.

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Eight: A Holly, Jolly Christmas

In the days following Holly's triumphant victory, Slytherin House finally managed to reach some semblance of calm, not to say that they still weren't ecstatic. They held a continuing party the rest of the weekend, the celebration due in part to the fact that they once again had a more than decent Seeker. Holly, however, quickly grew tired of the festivities, so she and her Slytherin friends spent the majority of the weekend with Hagrid at his hut or hiding out in the library.

It was there, in the library, that they discovered the owner of the mysterious vault 713. They were searching through old copies of the *Dailey Prophet*, looking for any other information on the robbery, when they discovered an article mentioning Sir Nicholas Flamel. The editorial in question was over thirty years old, but it covered an incident of fraud where a witch had created a key and attempted to rob a vault at Gringotts. The article further continued by stating the vault number and the owner. Armed with this new information, plus the facts that Milli assured them that she had heard of Flamel before and that he probably still owned the vault, they began looking through the library proper, hoping to find another reference to him.

The involvement of Flamel was further confirmed when Theo not so subtly asked Hagrid about the three-headed dog on the forbidden corridor. And the giant firmly replied that "Fluffy" and what he was guarding "is between Dumbledore and Flamel."

The weekend passed quickly, and soon enough, it was Monday.

Holly had not seen her Gryffindor friends since the Quidditch match, mostly due to the fact that she had been so involved in the search for Flamel. When she did see them again, she teetered with telling them about the impending mystery.

On one hand, Hermione was an excellent researcher and would be an asset. Further, Ron and Neville, and possibly Fred and George, would be extra hands that could help them search.

On the other, the Slytherins plus Gavin and minus Draco and his stooges had discovered the mystery on their own and were the only ones working on it. Their search and the large amounts of time they

spent together resulted in a bond; they were becoming friends, real friends.

Already, Holly was loosening up around them, letting them in. Before she had been on friendly terms with the others, but she had only really spent time with Theo, Milli, and Blaise. Further, she was only truly comfortable with the last. Now, she was relaxing around them, and even laughing and joking with them.

Her relationship with her roommates had improved dramatically. Originally, they had spoken very little, mostly greetings and the usual talk between those who share a living space. Currently, they were involved in each other's lives.

Holly now knew about Pansy's crush on Theo and her close bond with her mother. She learned about Autumn's little brother and the girl's hope that he was magical, too. She discovered Cynthia's love for music and her never-ending need to practice her harp, even teaching Holly the basics. She learned about Daphne's widowed mother, her father dying when Daphne was only a little girl, and about the girl's hope that her mum would eventually find love again. Finally, she learned more about Milli, discovering her three passions: drawing, Quidditch, and gardening, of all things.

Holly now knew about all of this, and she could honestly say that she was much happier for it.

In the end, she decided to hold off on telling anyone else. Holly concluded that she couldn't take back the knowledge once they knew, but she could always tell them later.

The days until December went by in a giant blur, highlighted only by the continuing search for Flamel and an encounter with Flitwick the last day of November. Holly had gone to his office that day to ask the Charms professor about an advanced spell he had mentioned several months back. The *Fidelius* charm had sounded quite interesting to her with its ability to hide a secret within a single person, and she had attempted to research the spell but had had very little luck. Eventually, she plucked up her courage and asked the professor about the spell.

"Professor?" Holly asked as she knocked on the door to his office.

Flitwick looked up from his grading and beamed as he noticed the Slytherin. "Ah, yes. Hello, Miss Potter. Come in, come in," he stated happily, coming out from behind his desk. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"Actually, yes, Professor," she responded, approaching him cautiously. "I've been looking for a spell in the library; you mentioned it in class a few weeks ago, but I haven't been able to find anything."

He seemed interested. "What was the spell, my dear?"

"The *Fidelius* charm..." the Slytherin trailed off as she noticed the man's expression.

Professor Flitwick's head snapped up, and he looked at her sharply. "The ***Fidelius* charm?**" he questioned incredulously, eyes going glassy. "Where, by Circe, did you hear of this spell?"

Holly gave him a puzzled glance. "In class," she answered slowly, "like I said before."

Professor Flitwick instantly sprang out of his daze. "Really?" He seemed to be trying to remember. "Ah, yes. I do believe that I mentioned it." The tiny teacher glanced at Holly again and inhaled slowly. Finally, he gestured to the empty seat in front of his desk, indicating that she should sit.

"What was it that you wanted to know about the charm?" he asked gently, an unreadable emotion in his voice.

Holly glanced at the Charms professor but took the offered seat. "Well," she began, "I have been wondering about the ability to conceal a secret in a single person..."

After the incident, Holly became a frequent visitor of the tiny Charms teacher. Often, she would stop in just to chat, usually about various magical texts, or to discuss spells mentioned in class. It was after one of these visits two weeks before term ended that she returned to the Common Room, only to find it empty.

Shaking her head at this, she realised that all of the older students were in class and that only the first-years had an open period. She walked down the short corridor to the study rooms, searching for her friends. All but one door was open, so Holly assumed they must be there, and as she approached the door, she heard voices coming from inside. She was about to open it and announce herself when the sound of her name caught her attention. The girl cocked her head closer to the door, mentally and physically listening in.

“But which one of us should stay?” Pansy asked.

Theo made a neutral sound. “I don’t know, but we can’t leave her here by herself.”

“True,” Gavin said emphatically. “And why’s she staying here anyway? Are her relatives going somewhere?”

“Possibly,” Milli stated, “or maybe they just don’t want her to come home.”

The others remained silent after this pronouncement but, Holly assumed, exchanged ominous glances.

Finally, Blaise said, “Who knows. Well, I suppose that Holly does, but I don’t fancy asking her,” he added sarcastically. “All I know is that someone needs to stay here with her. I’d say that most of us won’t be able to convince our parents to let us, unless we tell them the real reason why--”

“Or make up a really good excuse,” Daphne interrupted.

“Or make up a good excuse,” Blaise allowed. “But still,” he went on, “I’d say that at least one of us can get permission.”

“Sounds about right,” Autumn commented with a trace of hope in her voice. “So are we just going to ask all of our parents then?”

Gavin concluded, “We’d have to since we have no way of knowing whose parents would say yes otherwise.”

“True,” Autumn acquiesced, making him laugh.

“So it’s settled then,” Cynthia Moon spoke up. “We’ll each ask our parents if we can stay and hope for the best.”

“Yes,” Blaise stated absentmindedly, “we’ll hope for the best.”

Holly slowly crept away from the door as the conversation came to a close. She snuck back into the still vacant Common Room and out the portrait. She waited a few minutes before entering again, meeting her year-mates in the dorm and pretending that she hadn’t overheard anything.

The last two weeks of term flew by, and soon enough, it was break.

In the end, Blaise stayed at Hogwarts for Christmas as well. Although he made an excuse, saying that his parents would be on the continent and that it would be easier if he just stayed at school, Holly was not fooled. She knew that he stayed so that she wouldn’t have to spend the holiday alone.

The first day of break dawned bright and clear, despite fears of snowstorms. Holly awoke early that morning to finish her letter to Remus and send it along with his Christmas gift via Hedwig. After the white owl was just a speck in the sky, she hurried up to the Great Hall to see off her Slytherin friends, Gavin, Hermione, and Neville on their way to the train station. Ron and his brothers came to join her and quickly dragged her into an exciting game of cards with an Exploding Snap deck.

The rest of the week leading up to Christmas passed in a haze for Holly. It was filled with long periods of homework with Blaise, the two determined to finish before Christmas so they could have the rest of the time to search for Flamel. She also learned to play wizard chess with Ron, having borrowed Milli’s set. Of course, the days included avoiding the twin’s pranks since they had apparently grown tired of only picking on Percy. The only notable incident during the entire time occurred on Christmas Eve in the nearly empty Slytherin Common Room.

Blaise and Holly had just completed the last of their holiday work when he stood to stretch and moved off to sit on the sofa in front of the fireplace. The two were the only ones currently in there since the

other four Slytherins who had stayed were all upper-years and were having some sort of party in one of the dungeons with the Ravensclaws. As such, the two first-years could get the good seats by the fire.

Blaise waved her over to sit by him to could talk about Flamel as they played Exploding Snap. And an hour later, the two were settling back, having tired of both the game and the discussion.

Blaise sighed contentedly, staring into the fire and occasionally glancing at his best friend. After several moments, he unconsciously leaned toward Holly to whisper something to her, only to notice her flinch away automatically.

"Why do you do that?" he asked suddenly, pulling back to look at her.

Holly stiffened. "Do what?" she countered innocently, scanning his surface thoughts in an attempt to discover what he was thinking.

"Do this," Blaise replied, touching her hand with his.

She instinctively recoiled and shifted away.

"No reason," Holly stated steadily, trying to hide the shake in her voice.

Blaise shook his head. "I don't believe you." He moved closer to her once more. "There is a reason, and you know it."

The girl tried to move away again, but Blaise caught her hand, forcing her to stay. He gazed at her intently before speaking again.

"It's your relatives, isn't it?" He ploughed on before she could even begin to think of an answer. "That's why you never talk about them. Why you never get any letters from them. Why you didn't go home for Christmas." He held her hand in his, running his fingers along her palm.

Holly fought the urge to shy away. "Maybe... possibly." Seeing his disbelieving look, she continued, "Fine, yes. They are the reason," she stated faintly.

Blaise whispered, "What did they do?" He stroked her hand again, softly squeezing it.

"Nothing bad," Holly declared vehemently, suddenly grateful that there was no one else in the Common Room. "It's just..." She hesitated and avoided his eye.

"Just?" Blaise questioned, shifting so that she would be forced to look at him.

She shrugged. "They were never really affectionate when I was little, and... well, I never really had many friends either. So I guess, I am just not used to it. You know, being touched and all that," she put in smoothly, telling the truth but not the whole truth.

Blaise gazed at her like he did believe her but also as if he knew she was leaving something out.

"Is that all?" he asked.

But the girl refused to answer. She just gazed steadily at the floor.

After a moment, he sighed. "Well, we'll just have to fix that won't we?" he stated amicably, squeezing her hand once more and giving her a genuine smile.

Holly's head snapped up, and she looked at him in confusion. "What?"

Blaise chuckled. "We'll just have to get you used to being around people and having them touch you," he elaborated, clearly liking the idea.

She looked at him guardedly and reached out to his thoughts to see if he was sincere. What she found brought a smile to her face.

"I think that I might like that," she answered simply.

By the next morning, the incident was not forgotten but was in the back of Holly's mind. The thing that currently held her attention was

the fact that it was Christmas... and that she had actually received presents, not that she told Blaise about the latter.

The two were once more sitting in the Slytherin Common Room, only on the floor in the corner this time, opening presents with the rest of the remaining Slytherins. Holly was quite surprised to see that she had received things from all of her year-mates sans Draco, Crabbe, and Goyle. Of course, she also had gifts from Hermione, Neville, Ron, Fred and George, Remus, Hagrid, and apparently Ron's mother.

She held up the emerald-green sweater, gazing back and forth between it and the apology note from Mrs. Weasley about the incident at the train station. She couldn't help but smirk and handed the note to Blaise, who laughed before giving it back. The girl merely shook her head and turned to the last gift. It was from Hagrid and turned out to be a wooden flute that whistled shrilly when played. She smiled brightly at the gift and added it to her pile of things, which included several books from her dorm-mates and Remus, Chocolate Frogs from Ron and Neville, a diary from Hermione, and a beautifully woven emerald cloak from Milli.

She watched silently for a few minutes as the others opened their last presents before she wished them a Happy Christmas and carried her things to the girls' dorm. Holly had just finished putting up the last it, when she noticed another wrapped package by her trunk. She studied the box curiously, certain that it had not been there when she had carried the rest of her presents to the Common Room. Holly checked the package for a tag and, not finding one, debated what to do.

After a moment, she shrugged and picked it up, leaving her room and proceeding to head down the hallway and over the boys' side. The Slytherin hesitated outside the door but finally decided that she didn't care if she wasn't allowed, and she headed down the hallway to Blaise's room.

The boy popped his head out at her knock, looking only momentarily surprised. However, he ushered her in and shut the door once more.

"Er... Holly? You know that you are not supposed to be in here, right?" he asked after a second, fighting a smile.

Holly smirked. "I know, but I found another gift. I must have missed it earlier," she replied, hefting the package.

"Oh, let's see then." He offered her a seat on a bed near the far wall, which she assumed was his.

She quickly unwrapped the box, and something fluid and silvery grey slithered to the floor, where it lay in gleaming folds.

Blaise gasped. "Wow! If that is what I think it is... brilliant!" He beamed at Holly. "It's an Invisibility Cloak! Try it on."

The girl wrapped it around her shoulders, noticing that the body parts underneath the cloak had vanished.

"Brilliant," she whispered to Blaise.

"Yes," he answered. "Imagine what we can do with this. We could prank the twins," he stated with awe before glancing at the floor. "Oh, look. A note fell out of it." He picked up the letter and handed it to Holly, who pulled off the cloak.

Written in narrow, loopy writing she had never seen before were the words:

Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well.

A Very Happy Christmas to you.

Holly handed the note to Blaise, and he read it quickly.

"Hm... interesting. It still doesn't say who it is from," he commented, turning to look at her.

"No, it doesn't." She eyed the cloak.

The two sat in silence for several moments before Holly eventually returned to her room, packing away the cloak. Yet, even as she was placing it reverently beside the rest of her gifts, she couldn't help but wonder who had sent it. And why.

Both lunch and dinner that day were exciting events. Holly obtained her very own chess set from the Christmas crackers, as well as a book filled with interesting curses, a Grow-Your-Own-Warts kit, and a few other things. She, Blaise, and the Weasleys also enjoyed an energising bout of snow fighting before eventually trudging inside.

But through all this, she couldn't help but think about the cloak.

Use it well.

Holly stirred in her bed that night, unable to sleep. Her mind kept drifting to the cloak. Finally, after what seemed like hours but was probably merely minutes, she slipped out of bed and opened her trunk. She gently pulled the Invisibility Cloak free and carefully placed it around her shoulders and over her head.

Use it well.

Holly smiled and exited her room. She slipped quietly down the hall, into the Common Room, and out the entrance. The occupants of the portrait didn't even wake as she passed, but she hesitated just outside the entrance.

Where should she go?

Then, it struck her. The Restricted Section! Milli had complained earlier that there might be information about Flamel there. Yet, there was no way they could ever get a teacher to allow them access.

'But with my Invisibility Cloak,' Holly thought suddenly, 'I don't need permission.' She smirked and headed toward the library.

The Restricted Section was at the back, separated by a rope. Holly searched through the books, unsure of where to start. Eventually, she just sighed and selected a book at random. However, when she opened it a piercing and bloodcurdling shriek split the silence. The book was screaming!

The Slytherin immediately snapped it shut, but the scream persisted. She backed up, knocking over her wand, which went out abruptly. She quickly picked it up and moved into the empty space between

the bookshelves. In the background, she could feel a mind coming towards her, and she knew that Filch was coming to investigate.

Holly quickly fled the library and down the hall into a secret passage that took her to the first floor near the Entrance Hall. She moved down the corridor and around a corner, but she stopped when she felt two other people and heard whispers.

It was Professor Snape and Filch, and they were talking about the library.

Backing away slowly as the two turned and started in her direction, Holly squeezed into an open doorway. She watched silently as the pair continued up the hall before turning to investigate the room she was in, but it was completely empty save a mirror standing near the far wall. She approached cautiously, noting the inscription at the top: *Erised stra ehru oyt tube cafru oyt on wohsi.*

"I show not your face but your heart's desire?" she questioned out loud, noting that the inscription was backwards, a mirror image.

The Slytherin contemplated that for a moment. Shrugging, she leaned forward to inspect the glass... before suddenly jumping back in surprise. Her reflection was in the mirror, even with her wearing the Invisibility Cloak. Not only that, but there were people in there, in the reflection. People other than her.

Holly glanced around the room, and not seeing or sensing anyone, she began to wonder. After a moment, she drew up her courage and stepped forward once more to look at the reflection. Gazing back at her, she first saw herself and then a man and a woman. Both were standing directly behind her with a hand on each shoulder.

The Slytherin continued to gaze at the image but cautiously moved her hand to her shoulder. Strangely, she felt nothing. She reached out her mind again, but still... nothing. Finally, Holly simply stared at the mirror, studying the two adults present and inching closer to get a better look.

The woman had vivid red hair and green eyes. Eyes just like Holly's.

Her gaze flickered to the man in the mirror. Dark and untidy hair, glasses, and a very familiar smile.

Suddenly, it dawned on her.

"These are my parents," she gasped, taking another step forward. "They look just like they do in my locket." She fingered her necklace, moving so close to the glass that her nose touched the surface.

The Invisibility Cloak drifted off of her and to the floor.

And there were other people, too, standing on either side of her parents. They were both men, and Holly was startled to see that Remus was one of them, though he looked much healthier than the last time she had seen him.

Her attention turned to the other man, who was standing between Remus and her father with an arm around their shoulders, laughing heartily. He was also dark-headed but with bluish-silver eyes, and the girl stared at him for several moments, vaguely recognising him. But for all that he was very familiar, she couldn't quite place him. Perhaps he, like Remus, had been a friend of her parents.

In the background, the girl finally noticed even more people, at least ten of them. Holly spotted several others with her eyes, her smile, her glasses, and even one who seemed to have her knobby knees. Yet, for all the similar features of the people, there was something odd about them in comparison with each other. Though, for the life of her, the Slytherin couldn't think of what.

And even as Holly watched the mirror, the image suddenly changed. She backed up several steps as the reflection once more became clear.

It was a boy.

He was about sixteen and was wearing Hogwarts robes with a Slytherin crest. He simply stood, staring straight back at her and holding a book in his hand. He smirked merrily at her after a moment before turning to flip through his book.

‘Wait a minute,’ Holly thought quickly, staring at the image of a person she hadn’t even met. ‘Wait, I do know him. He’s the one from my dream. The Slytherin in the Common Room.’ She thought back to the incident several weeks earlier. ‘I dreamt of him, but other than that, I have never seen him before.’

The girl inclined her head to examine the image closer, but she heard a unexpected noise in the distance. She quickly whirled the cloak about her shoulders and fled, vowing to return the next night.

True to her word, she did. This time with Blaise in tow.

Holly dragged her friend straight up to the mirror and demanded that he look. She had already told him earlier that she had seen her family and then a boy, but she decided that he probably wouldn’t. The mirror was supposed to show one’s inner most desire, and for her, that was her family. And apparently, a boy she had never even met.

“I see them, Blaise,” Holly whispered, whipping the cloak off of them. “I see my parents and their friends... and some boy I don’t even know. But, like I said, you’ll see something different,” she added.

He nodded in understanding. “I wonder what I’ll see?” the boy questioned himself, not noticing that she had heard. He stepped closer to the glass and inhaled sharply.

“Blaise,” she murmured excitedly. “Blaise, what do you see?”

However, he didn’t answer. He simply stared and continued staring, only stopping when Holly placed her hand on his shoulder. He started and whirled to face her.

“Great Maker, Holly,” he murmured, clutching his chest. “You gave me an awful fright.”

She looked at him sheepishly. “Sorry, but you wouldn’t answer,” she responded, trying to soothe him. “What did you see?” Holly repeated after a moment.

Again, he didn’t answer. He only smirked, making the girl raise her eyebrows with interest. A fleeting idea of prying into his thoughts

passed through her mind, but she quickly dismissed it. If he didn't want to tell her, then she wouldn't force it.

Eventually, the two turned back to the mirror, gazing into the surface. They were eventually forced to stop when Mrs. Norris snuck into the room and then zipped off to find Filch. The Slytherin duo slipped under the cloak and out of the room, racing to the dorm.

The next day, all the girl's thoughts were consumed by the images in the mirror. She shut herself in her room the entire day, not even letting in the sixth-year girl Blaise had sent to get her since he couldn't enter the girl's hallway. Holly simply sat on her bed, attempting to read but failing at it. Mostly, she was just wool-gathering and fingering her locket.

That night, Holly finally did leave her room, only to return to the mirror once more.

"So back again, Holly?" Dumbledore asked from a corner as the Slytherin strode into the room.

She was so intent on gazing into the mirror that she hadn't even noticed him.

Silently, the girl berated herself. "I didn't see you, sir," she murmured with trepidation.

Dumbledore, however, smiled. "Strange how nearsighted being invisible can make you," he said, and Holly exhaled with relief when she noticed his grin. "So, you, like hundreds before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised," the headmaster continued.

The Slytherin actually had to fight her sudden splurge of interest. "Really? I didn't know it was called that, sir."

"But I expect you've realised by now what it does?"

Holly nodded. "Yes, it shows a person their *heart's desire*," she responded.

The headmaster's smile widened. "Oh, good. You figured out the inscription." He beamed happily. "Yes," he stated coming up to her, "that is exactly what it does. The happiest man on Earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised like a normal mirror because it shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desires of our hearts," he whispered solemnly. "It showed you your family and your friend Blaise something else entirely."

"How did you know--" Holly began before she realised how rude that sounded.

"I don't need a cloak to become invisible," said Dumbledore gently.

The girl, while believing that to be true, knew he hadn't been in the room with them at the time. She would have felt him then since she had been more cautious their previous visits and had specifically searched for others in the room. Nevertheless, she did not call Dumbledore on his lie by omission. She simply nodded.

Professor Dumbledore gave her a searching glance before continuing. "The Mirror will be moved to a new home tomorrow, Holly, and I ask you not to go looking for it again. This mirror will give us neither knowledge nor truth," he explained at her puzzled look. "Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible."

The headmaster sighed and gently steered the Slytherin away from the mirror in question, noticing her wince and fight the urge to pull back. He gave her a strange look but didn't say anything because he couldn't be sure if her reaction was due to his words or something else entirely.

"If you ever do run across it, you will now be prepared," Dumbledore carried on his earlier train of thought. "It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that. Now, why don't you put that admirable cloak back on and get off to bed?"

Holly nodded numbly thinking over his words. Just as she was about to put her cloak on an idea occurred to her.

"Sir... Professor Dumbledore?"

The man turned to look at her.

“What do you see when you look into the mirror?”

Another odd expression passed over the headmaster’s face, but it was gone in an instant. “I? I see myself holding a pair of thick, woollen socks. One can never have enough socks, my dear girl” he put in conspiratorially. “Another Christmas has come and gone, and I didn’t get a single pair. People will insist on giving me books.”

Dumbledore said all this as he led her toward the door, but she didn’t believe him for a moment. Something in her heart knew that he was lying.

Holly didn’t reach out her mind, but Dumbledore’s thoughts were so strong that she caught them anyway. She had the sudden image of the headmaster with a smile on his face, a real smile, and a phoenix perched on his shoulder. His free arm was wrapped around another man, who had dark, messy hair and who looked somewhat familiar. Very familiar actually. The two were laughing and smiling, sharing a camaraderie that only family can ever have.

The image flashed fleetingly in her mind and was gone in an instant, leaving only a memory behind. Later that night, Holly laid in bed thinking about it and trying to remember the face of the other man. Even as she drifted off to sleep, she wondered why the headmaster had lied.

‘But then,’ she thought sleepily, closing her eyes, ‘it had been a very personal question.’

Holly did not seek out the mirror again, and she was glad when break was over because she was now having horrible nightmares. She had hoped that the hustle and bustle, along with the return of her friends and the renewed search for Flamel would keep the night-time images away, but it didn’t. She kept dreaming of horrible green light followed by a high, cold laugh.

Just shy of a week into term, and no relief in sight, she finally broke down and told Blaise about her nightmares. She confessed everything to him, including the fact that she suspected the dreams

weren't really dreams at all, but memories of the night her parents died.

Blaise took it all in stride, not berating Holly once, but he did give her a stern look when she told him how long the nightmares had gone on. He talked to her calmly, softly, and rubbed her back as she told him. He even smiled as she fought her natural urge to recoil and leaned into the comfort. The boy then pronounced that it was time to tell the others about the mirror, not necessarily the images that went with it, and about her new cloak.

She readily agreed.

After speaking with Blaise about her nightmares, Holly noticed that the terrible dreams faded away, only to be replaced with images of the boy she had seen in the mirror and with other strange things.

She dreamt that she was in a forest, the deep, dark, and secret parts of the woods. She was surrounded beautiful silvery and ethereal horse-like creatures. Unicorns. She would pet and play with the lovely beings for a time before a thing came, a shade that would chase after them. A monster that hunted the unicorns, killing them and feeding off of their blood.

Holly would try to protect them; she would always go for her wand, but the thing was far too strong and would always overpower her. It was then, when all seemed lost that another person burst onto the scene: a centaur, Firenze. And he would drive off the monster and carry her to safety.

The girl was not sure what these dreams meant, but she felt that they were connected with whatever Fluffy was guarding. And it all eventually led straight back to Flamel.

Who was he? What was Dumbledore protecting for him?

Holly didn't know, but she would find out. She would bet her life on it.

Thanks to *Hobbit-Tabby* for the beta.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks!

Chapter Nine: Demons and Dreams

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Nine: Demons and Dreams

January passed quickly, filled with the continuing search for Flamel and the endless Quidditch practices Flint insisted that the team have. According to the increasingly obsessive captain, they would be in the clear for the cup if they beat Ravenclaw by more than a hundred points.

"We'll win hands down," Flint assured them after one particularly gruelling practice, which involved a great deal of sleet, freezing rain, and Drying charms. "Even if we don't score anything against Hufflepuff, the odds are in our favour to win the cup. All we have to do is beat Ravenclaw by a hundred points or more." He rubbed his hands together with glee, looking very much like a character from one of Dudley's favourite shows.

"But why are we even practicing so hard, Marcus," Titania Shacklebolt asked, trying to dry out her broom with her wand. "The Ravenclaw team is rubbish. I heard that they actually had to bribe someone to be their Seeker. No one wanted the position." She glanced at her broom in half-triumph and half-disgust as the water drained from it.

"That's true. Jameson is complete rubbish as a player. They'll replace her next year no doubt," Flint acquiesced, starting to pace across the floor of the changing room. He glanced at them before going on, "But remember, Snape is referring; he'll be hard on us, makes us play spectacularly if we want to win."

Holly stopped mid-motion, her Quidditch gloves half-off. "Professor Snape is refereeing?" she questioned, her eyes widening with this new information. "Why?"

Marcus looked stumped, but he answered after a moment. "Not sure. I think that Dumbledore might have forced him into or something of the like. Perhaps he feels that the Professor needs to get out more and that this is the perfect opportunity. Silly since he comes to all of our games anyway." He shrugged and resumed his pacing. "But then, Dumbledore doesn't always do things that make sense," he stated, stopping in front of Titania. "Enough of this anyway. We need to get changed and back to the dorms."

After returning to the Common Room, Holly quickly took her year-mates into an unused study room and informed them about the Potions master's sudden desire to referee the match.

"You know what," Theo quickly commented, opening a Chocolate Frog. "I bet that he is doing this because of the last Quidditch match." He offered an unopened one to Holly, who was sitting next to him.

"Thanks. That's what I thought," the girl confirmed quietly, taking the package but not opening it.

Blaise nodded. "It makes sense. With him in the air, Quirrell will be hard-pressed to harm you again," he thought out loud.

"I still don't understand why he hexed the broom in the first place," Milli said warily, reaching out from her position to the side to pat her friend on the shoulder.

Most of the others shrugged in reply, but Gavin's eyes glazed over.

"Flamel," he whispered.

"Pardon?" Pansy, who was sitting next to him, queried. She looked rather confused.

"Flamel," he repeated, his eyes flickering around the group. "It might have something to do with Flamel and whatever Fluffy is guarding."

"But why harm Holly?" Autumn asked softly.

"Not sure," he submitted, considering the problem.

"Maybe he just wanted her out of the way," Cynthia Moon supplied, taking up the thought.

"But still... why?" Daphne questioned, looking up from her copy of the *Quibbler*.

"Who knows," Blaise inserted himself in the exchange. "Maybe it has something to do with Flamel, but for all we know, Quirrell could be a

secret Death Eater or something and is vying for revenge.” He cast an odd glance at Holly.

She exhaled slowly and fingered her unopened Chocolate Frog. “That makes slightly more sense than the Flamel guess, but until we discover what Fluffy is guarding, we can’t rule out that as the reason.”

“So I guess that means we should get on with researching then,” Theo said smoothly, looking at Holly and Blaise. “Do you think we should break down and tell the Gryffindors about it?” he asked, referring to Hermione, Ron, and Neville.

“Yes,” the caramel-skinned boy stated. “We need all the help that we can get.” He glanced at his watch. “In fact, we should go tell them now. My bet is that we can catch Hermione in the library; she could fetch the others from the Common Room.”

Everyone nodded, some more reluctant than others.

“Who’s going to go?” Milli questioned.

“Me,” Holly said quickly, moving to her feet. “I am on the best terms with them.” She pocketed her still unopened Chocolate Frog.

“And me,” Blaise stated, also rising. “You shouldn’t go alone, not with Quirrell out for your head.”

She inclined her head in understanding and went for the door.

“Okay, then,” Pansy commented as the two paused by the entrance. “The rest of us will continue looking through the books we brought back.”

Holly and Blaise both smiled and left. The two travelled to the library, where they almost immediately found Hermione with her head buried in a book. They swiftly informed her that they had something important to tell her and asked if she would go to fetch Ron and Neville.

“Well, why don’t you just come with me?” Hermione asked, standing and hitching her bag on her shoulder.

“What?” Holly and Blaise questioned together.

“Come with me. I’m sure the other Gryffindors won’t mind if you come in the Common Room as long as I don’t tell you the password.” She quickly assured them when she noted their incredulous expressions, “I’ve seen people from other Houses in our there several times.”

“Well, we’ve seen the same in ours,” Blaise commented, looking at the Gryffindor strangely. “Usually, it’s not first-years though.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Hermione dismissed their fears. “Come along.” She led them up a corridor and to the one of the towers. She stopped outside of a portrait of a fat lady in a pink dress, who eyed the two first-year Slytherins warily.

“Friends?” she questioned, turning to Hermione.

“Oh, yes,” the bushy-haired girl said absentmindedly. “Blaise Zabini and Holly Potter.”

The fat lady suddenly perked up. “Holly Potter, did you say? You wouldn’t happen to be Lily’s daughter, would you?” she asked breathlessly.

The girl glanced at the portrait strangely. “Yes, that is my mother’s name,” she said slowly.

Hermione and Blaise stared at her.

The fat lady grinned widely. “Well, that’s different then. If you’re Lily’s child, then you will always be welcome here. And you can feel free to come and talk to me anytime, dear.” The portrait beamed and swung open without even hearing the password.

“Er... right,” Holly stated softly. “Thank you,” she finished, looking back and forth between her friends and shrugging.

The two gave weak smiles.

Hermione huffed before she climbed in the opening and headed into the Common Room, Holly following with Blaise bringing up the rear.

Surprisingly, there were only a few Gryffindors present, who barely even glanced at the Slytherin intruders, Ron included.

The redhead looked up from what appeared to be a book about Quidditch as they approached.

“We have something very important to tell you?” Holly interrupted before Ron could question the fact that they were in Gryffindor Tower. “Do you know where Neville is?”

However, before Ron could respond, the question was answered for them. At that moment the boy in question toppled into the Common Room. How he had managed to climb through the portrait hole was anyone’s guess because his legs had been stuck together with the Leg-Lockercurse. It was courtesy of Draco Malfoy, something he informed them after Holly lifted the hex.

Afterwards, the Slytherin girl quickly gathered her friends closer. “Come on,” she whispered and headed for the exit.

The others exchanged glances and followed as she led them several corridors away from the entrance to the tower. She led them to an alcove Fred and George had told her about. There, Holly and Blaise quickly informed the Gryffindors about Fluffy and Nicolas Flamel.

As expected, the three looked put out that she hadn’t told them earlier. They seemed happier when they realised that she had trusted them enough with the information, although Ron did object when Blaise mentioned the possible Quirrell connection. The redhead firmly believed that Snape was involved and not the Defence professor.

After much discussion, the topic of Flamel almost worn out, Neville announced that he was heading back to the Common Room; he felt a bit out of sorts due to his prolonged cursed state. In a spur of the moment action and feeling a bit guilty about her Housemate’s abysmal treatment of him, Holly took the Chocolate Frog out of her pocket and offered it to Neville; he took it gratefully.

“Thanks, Holly. I think I’ll go to bed,” he announced warily. “Do you want the card; you collect them, don’t you?”

As Neville walked away, she looked at the Famous Wizard card. "Dumbledore again," she said, flipping it over just for a lark. "He was the first one I ever--"

She gasped and motioned for the others to gather closer. Neville reluctantly came back over.

Holly suddenly smirked at them. "**I've found him!**" she whispered excitedly.

"What?" Ron asked incredulously.

"That was fast," Neville quipped.

"I've found Flamel!" Holly murmured excitedly. "I **told** the others that I'd read the name somewhere before; I saw it on the train coming here. Listen to this: '*Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the Dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, **and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel!***'"

Hermione looked dumbfounded. "Stay here!" she commanded and quickly rushed to the Common Room.

The others barely had time to exchange mystified looks before she was dashing back, an enormous, old book in her arms. She quickly informed them that she had taken the book out weeks earlier for a bit of "light reading."

Ron and Neville looked sceptical at the comment. However, the two Slytherins merely shrugged and glanced at the excerpt pertaining to Flamel. Both were secretly wondering at the irony of Hermione checking out the only book from the library that related to him.

The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Philosopher's Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers. The stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.

There have been many reports of the Philosopher's Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Sir

Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera lover. Sir Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Lady Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight).

“See?” said Hermione, when they had finished. “The dog is most definitely guarding the Stone for Flamel. I bet he asked Dumbledore to keep it safe for him because they’re friends and he knew someone was after it; that’s why he wanted it removed from Gringotts!”

“A stone that makes gold and stops you from ever dying,” Holly repeated. “No wonder Quirrell is after it. Anyone would want that.” She glanced at Blaise. “We should go tell the others.” She looked back to the Gryffindors. “Thanks for your help. We really need to be getting back.”

The Slytherins quickly bid goodbye and all but ran to their Common Room. There was a great deal of muttering when they informed their year-mates about Flamel and the Stone.

“No wonder we couldn’t find anything about him,” Gavin moaned. “Hermione had the only book that mentioned him.”

February quickly bled into March, and it was time for the Slytherin-Ravenclaw match. All of Flint’s worries over the match and the first-years’ fears that Quirrell, or Snape depending on who was doing the worrying, would attack Holly were proven unfounded. She caught the Snitch within minutes, not even giving Ravenclaw a chance to score, and allowing Slytherin a 210 to 0 victory. It was the worst defeat the Eagles had suffered in almost twenty years, and they were not happy about it.

Still, the real excitement of the day wasn’t actually the match. Instead, it was the fight that erupted with Ron, Neville, Dean, and Seamus on one side pitted against Draco, Crabbe, and Goyle. Additionally, there was the little matter of Holly’s expedition into the woods on her broom, following Professor Snape as he confronted Quirrell about the protections of the Stone.

The days passed, Fluffy still apparently guarding the Stone, but a new threat soon appeared on the horizon. Exams were coming.

As a result, Holly and Blaise were spending increasing amounts of time in the library studying ahead so that they wouldn't have to cram the week before the tests. Yet, they didn't study all the time; they did take breaks occasionally. Mostly, however, these breaks consisted of spending time in the Common Room with their Slytherin friends, keeping a watchful eye on Quirrell, or visiting Hagrid with Ron, Hermione, and Neville.

This had, of course, led to yet another problem.

Hagrid had a dragon.

That was the only thought that currently occupied Holly's mind. She was sitting at a secluded table in the library, which was also currently occupied by Blaise, Ron, Hermione, and Neville. The five of them had earlier gone for a visit with the giant to uncover more information about the Philosopher's Stone, but they had been distracted from their original intent by a little problem... a little dragon problem.

'Hagrid has a dragon... well, a dragon egg really. But still, a **dragon!**' Holly mentally groaned.

"A bloody dragon!" Blaise whispered exasperatedly to the others. "A dragon! The man lives in a wooden hut; dragons breathe fire!"

"I know, Blaise," Holly murmured back. "What are we going to do about it? Dragons are illegal as pets; he can't keep it."

"Maybe the egg won't hatch," Neville supplied helpfully, looking at the others.

"Perhaps," Hermione replied, wringing her hands fretfully, "but knowing our luck, it will."

Ron nodded emphatically. "Yeah. It'll probably be twins or something," he added, a look of horror dawning on his face.

"You don't think that could really happen?" Neville asked, fidgeting in his chair.

Holly and Blaise exchanged a glance.

"Maybe," the boy stated uneasily. "I don't really know that much about dragons, but let's not worry about that right now." He leaned forward and whispered, "The Stone is the more pressing matter."

Hermione voiced her agreement, "Yes, we need to focus on the Stone. It has slightly more priority." She turned to Holly and Blaise. "Though, I do have one question; do we tell the other Slytherins? They already know about the Stone, so should we tell them about the dragon?"

Holly thought for a moment. "I really want to tell them, but I am going to have to say no. We promised Hagrid that we wouldn't tell anyone else at the school, and I don't think that we should go back on our word."

Blaise rubbed his chin. "True. We did promise. Also, not saying anything bad about our Housemates or saying that they'll let it slip, but it would be better if we kept it to ourselves. The more people who know the greater the chance that someone else will find out."

"But the same could be said for the Stone," Hermione interrupted. "You did tell us, after all." She pointed to Ron, Neville, and herself.

"That's different," Holly asserted. "The professors already know about the Stone; they just think that it is well-guarded and that there's no chance anyone will get to it. If anyone else found out about it, they would think that another one of the teachers let it slip." She sighed before going on, "With Hagrid, we're the only ones who know, so he would blame us if anyone else found out. Plus, dragons are illegal. Hagrid could go to jail if anyone else knew about the egg."

"That makes sense," Hermione allowed, shifting in her seat. She was clearly considering the implications of such an event.

"So we aren't going to tell anyone else?" Ron voiced the question again.

"No," Blaise stated emphatically. "We should keep it to ourselves."

"Right. We should also work on getting rid of it," Holly added.

Neville glanced at her. "Getting rid of it?"

"Yes, there is no way that Hagrid can keep it for any length of time," she answered. "Dragons grow to huge size. It would be impossible for him to hide something that is bigger than his own house, unless he stashes it in the forest." She exhaled softly. "Even then, I am sure someone would figure it out after they start finding burnt animal remains and ashes all over the place."

Ron snorted. "It'd probably burn down the entire forest while it's at it."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Oh, Ronald, the likelihood of that actually happening is rather small. Most likely, it would only burn a portion of it before someone came to control the fire."

The Slytherins snorted at her statement.

The days passed quickly, interspersed by more studying and the search for a way to get rid of the dragon egg. Soon enough, however, their problems were compounded by the fact that the egg hatched, and baby Norbert, a Norwegian Ridgeback, was born. Further, it seemed as though Draco Malfoy had managed to overhear Ron and Neville talking about him. As such, the boy now knew about Hagrid's little dragon problem. Not only that, but Malfoy had actually seen the dragon one day when he had followed them to the hut.

As the week continued, the strange expression on Malfoy's face made quite an impact on everyone. They spent most of their free time now in Hagrid's darkened hut, trying to reason with him, and thankfully, they managed to wear the giant man down. He agreed to Holly's suggestion that they could send an owl to Charlie Weasley, Ron's brother who worked with dragons, to ask him to take Norbert.

The day of Charlie's reply, Ron was in an uproar due to the fact that the not-so-tiny dragon had bitten him. The redhead moaned and groaned for hours, almost forgetting to mention that the letter asked them to bring Norbert to the tallest tower at midnight on Saturday so that some of his friends could remove him.

"We've got the Invisibility Cloak," said Holly. "It shouldn't be too difficult. I think the cloak's big enough to cover two of us and Norbert."

She was definitely going herself as she was the smallest of them, and the only one who could fit with both the Norbert and another person. She quietly glanced at the others, deciding who else would do the deed.

“Ron, you feel up to the task?”

The boy looked at his swelling hand for a moment and nodded.

There was a hitch, however. By the next morning, Ron's bitten hand had swollen to twice its usual size. After his it turned a nasty shade of green, he was forced to go to the school nurse. This had, of course, led to an even more serious situation.

Malfoy visited the Hospital Wing, ostensibly to borrow a book from Ron... the same book Charlie's letter was in. Now, the blond boy knew of their plan to be rid of Norbert.

They decided to go through it anyway, only with Blaise in place of Ron. It was too late to change the plan, and with the Invisibility Cloak, they could go undetected.

So on Saturday, Blaise and Holly snuck down to Hagrid's Hut around ten. How they managed to get the crate back up to the castle without being caught they never knew. Midnight ticked nearer as they alternated levitating Norbert up the marble staircase in the Entrance Hall and along the darkened corridors. They went up another flight of steps and then another, even one of the twin's shortcuts didn't make the journey much shorter.

Heaving a sigh of relief as they reached the top on the tower, Holly and Blaise waited. Ten minutes later, Charlie's cheery friends showed up and relieved them of their burden.

At last, Norbert was going... going... gone.

The two breathed easier on their way back to the Common Room. Just as the clock struck one in the morning, they safely entered the Slytherin Common Room. An extremely sleepy, Holly whipped the cloak off of them and collapsed onto the couch in front of the fire. At the edge of her senses, she could detect a multitude of people, but

she was far too tired to know if they were sleeping or awake or if they were even in the same room as her.

The pair rested on the sofa for a moment before Blaise climbed to his feet and pulled the girl up, noting that she was too tired to even flinch away.

"I'm going up to bed now," he stated sleepily. "You should go, too." He nudged her toward the door.

"I will in a minute." She yawned in his face. "Excuse me. Go on; I'll be right up."

The boy smiled at her. Unexpectedly, he looped his arms around her in a spontaneous hug.

For once, she leaned into his touch.

Blaise finally pulled back. He beamed and was gone, leaving to go to bed.

Holly grinned after him. She stood there for a few seconds, dredging up the energy to make it to her room. Just as she moved to the door, a presence at her back caused her to whirl around.

Draco Malfoy was standing in the corner of the Common Room, staring at her.

She stared back.

Seconds stretched into minutes. Finally, Draco broke the silence.

"I didn't tell." His silver eyes bored into Holly's green ones.

Her sleep-deprived mind was clueless. "What?"

Draco shifted nervously. "About the dragon. Norbert, was it? I didn't tell anyone about him." He continued to stare at her.

"Oh... thanks." The girl couldn't think of anything else to say.

Draco nodded and continued to watch her.

“Really, I mean it,” she finally elaborated. “Thank you; it means a lot to me,” Holly whispered sincerely, eyes glittering as she tilted her head up to look at him.

He flushed strangely, pink tinting his pale and pointed face. Draco exhaled and looked as though he wanted to say something else. Instead, he merely nodded again and left.

She stared after him, shook her head, and headed to the girls’ side of the House. Holly trudged up the hallway to the first-year dorm and quietly slipped in the door. She tip-toed passed her roommates and to her bed in the corner. Automatically, she slipped into her nightdress, her mind elsewhere, focusing on her bizarre conversation with Draco Malfoy. The thoughts soon left her mind as she became so befuddled that she realised she actually tried to pull her nightgown on over her robe.

Finally, properly attired for sleep, she collapsed into bed.

That night, Holly dreamed.

She was in the forest again, just as before. Once more, she was being saved from the evil shade by Firenze the centaur and carried to safety. But at this point, her dream changed and did not end as usual. Instead, she clung to the centaur for several breathless moments, her heart racing.

“Greetings, Holly Potter, Seeker of Minds.” Firenze turned to face her, craning his neck. “We meet again. Yet, it seems as if we will finally have a chance to truly speak tonight.” The Slytherin made to move off his back, but he stopped her. “Stay. We may yet have to leave this place,” he ordered.

She inhaled sharply. “This isn’t really a dream, is it?”

“In a manner of speaking. It is a dream in the way that you are not physically here. Yet, it is not because we are able to speak to each other.”

Her eyes widened. “How are we able to do that?”

Firenze smiled faintly. "I am a Seer," he stated with emotion. "It is my power to allow us to interact."

"Oh." She paused. "But how... why am I dreaming of you?" Holly finally asked the question that had been burning in her mind.

Firenze hesitated. "I am not sure. Such ability is that of a Seer, but I am not certain that you are one." He eyed her curiously. "You are a Mind-Seeker for certain, but this may be beyond you. And yet, I still sense some potential that comes not from within you but from without."

"Without? You mean that a Seer is making me dream of you, but it's not me doing it?" she inquired incredulously. "I assume that it is not you doing it either."

"Another Seer is causing this," he answered simply. "However, I do not believe they are doing it intentionally. It is almost as if you have a connection to them and are tapping into their abilities."

"Connection? Like a mental connection?" the Slytherin asked.

Firenze nodded. "I have never felt a connection like this before. Usually bonds of this strength are the result of extremely powerful Mind Magic. And you, Mind-Seeker, should be far too young for such a thing."

This sent Holly's mind reeling. A mental connection cause by Mind Magic, but who was doing this? Who could cause her to share a dream with another?

The girl was about to question Firenze further, but she felt a pull on her mind. She was waking up, and she might not have the opportunity to talk this candidly to the centaur again.

She tried to fight, but in the end, consciousness won out. She managed a quick goodbye to Firenze before she was pulled completely away.

Holly opened her eyes and sat up, morning light shining through the enchanted windows of the dorm behind her. She glanced over to her

right, noticing that out of her five roommates only Milli was awake. The Slytherin quickly climbed out of bed and nodded a greeting to the other girl before dressing behind her curtains. She sat on her bed quietly for a few moments, remembering her earlier dream and the discoveries she had made.

‘Who could be the Seer that is causing this?’ she thought to herself dazedly. ‘Do I even have a strong enough connection to anyone for this to happen?’ She considered the question for a moment. ‘Well, I do have a bond with--’

“That’s it!” she murmured out loud.

Holly all but ran down to the Common Room. She searched around and, not finding who she was looking for, plopped down on the sofa to nervously wait. Every time someone came into the room, she would look up hopefully but was disappointed several times. Finally, after about an hour and just as she was fighting the urge to go up to his room, the person she was searching for came into the Common Room. She quickly moved to him.

“I have something very important to tell you,” she whispered without preamble to Blaise as she came up to him. “Follow me,” she ordered, leading him further into the dorms.

“What was it you wanted to tell me?” he asked as soon as they were locked inside an unused study room.

Holly decided that the direct approach would be best. “I’m a telepath.”

Blaise blinked... once... twice... three times. He stared at her in a sort of quiet shock.

The girl looked back nervously.

Finally, he overcame his surprise. “Er... right. I wasn’t really expecting you to say that. Thanks for trusting me enough to tell me, by the way.”

“You aren’t mad?” she queried hopefully.

“Mad? Why would I be mad?” Blaise gaped at her before it finally dawned on him. “How much do you actually know about telepathy?”

Holly shifted anxiously. “Just that I am one and that I have had to learn to control it.”

Blaise rubbed his hand over his face. “That explains it.” At his friend’s inquiring look, he explained, “You probably think that it is a curse or a freaky thing, but it isn’t. It’s an ability, some would say a gift, but it is neither good nor bad. And while it isn’t common, it isn’t unheard of either. I can actually name two well-known telepaths off the top of my head.”

She perked up, fighting a smile. “Really? Who?”

This was going so much better than she had imagined.

Blaise smirked and took her hand in his. “Circe and Siobhan Slytherin, wife of Salazar Slytherin. Salazar himself was an empath.”

Holly actually heaved a sigh of relief. “So it doesn’t bother you?”

“Not in the least. Most pure-bloods raise their children to appreciate such things,” he replied. “So no, I’m not bothered by it. Though, judging by your reaction, I do assume that you want me to keep it quiet.”

“Please do,” the girl said faintly, finally smiling. “I want to tell the others, just not yet. I wanted you to know first.”

Blaise grinned. “Really, and why is that?” he asked coyly.

She shifted in her seat. “You are my best friend, and I trust you. Well, and...” she trailed off.

“And?” he prompted.

Holly hesitated before launching into an explanation of the dreams she had been having about the shade, the forest, and the centaur. She mentioned what the dream-Firenze had said, adding in her own opinion that he was telling the truth. She teetered on saying the last

bit, but she mentioned her hypothesis that Blaise was the Seer causing the dreams.

"You think I am a Seer?" the boy questioned, wide-eyed. He exhaled slowly.

"Well, I am sorry to disappoint you, my friend, but I'm not a Seer. I don't even have a smidgen of talent in that area."

"You aren't," she repeated dejectedly. "Well, who else could it be? I don't have that sort of connection with anyone else."

Blaise smiled at her round-about compliment. Even if it was nothing but the truth, it was still nice to know she felt they were that close.

"Wait," Holly asked after a minute, "how do you know that you aren't a Seer? You could be and never know it?"

Blaise looked at her with sympathy, knowing that she was probably still agitated over her dream. "I was tested when I was younger," he answered simply.

Holly blinked. "Tested?"

"Yes, all pure-blood families test their children for certain magical gifts like Seer abilities, telepathy, and the like," he responded slowly, and at her frown, Blaise added, "Well, as you undoubtedly know, people with these powers need to be trained so that they can control their gifts. Sometimes, those who are untrained can be driven mad." He sighed at her wounded expression.

"But then, why didn't they know about my abilities? I had to teach myself. And believe me, it wasn't at all easy," she whispered, looking as though she wanted to cry.

Blaise reached out a hand to pat her; she recoiled slightly but allowed his hand to remain covering her own.

"Most children aren't tested until they are about five. The tests require their active participation, so they have to be old enough to understand what to do."

She breathed out softly. "So basically, my parents died before I was old enough, and no one else thought to come and check me for such things."

The two sat in silence for a few moments, neither knowing what to say.

Finally, Holly spoke again. "Why isn't there some form of generalised testing then? Not all families know to test their children, and the Muggles wouldn't even be able to."

Blaise shrugged. "For some reason, the Ministry refuses to do generalised testing, so anyone who wasn't born into a pure-blood family or whose parents never got around to testing them won't know," he answered, exhaling loudly. "I guess it goes back to the prejudice against Muggleborns. The Ministry doesn't think that anyone with Muggle blood would be blessed with gifts like those. Really stupid considering that the talents can manifest in anyone magical, regardless of purity of blood."

The girl scowled fiercely. "Wouldn't they realise that? There has to be some record of half-bloods or Muggleborns with such abilities," she commented heatedly.

"Oh, trust me, there are. But the Ministry refuses to treat those as the rule and not the exception."

Her scowl deepened. "That's just idiotic. They are too blind to see the truth," she bit out, crossing her arms across her chest. "Still, why don't the teachers just test the students anyway? Regardless of what the Ministry views are. They could check everyone when they arrive at Hogwarts. Some of the talents might have manifested by then, like mine did, but they could still find out for the others."

"You know that. I know that. By Circe, any fool could see that, but the Ministry refuses to do anything, and they won't allow anyone else to do anything either," Blaise responded, shaking his head. "I heard that Dumbledore actually wanted to implement the program when he became deputy headmaster, but the Minister refused. Every few years, Dumbledore will bring it back up, but the Ministry is still refusing."

“You know what it sounds like to me?” Holly questioned.

Blaise shook his head.

“Well, it sounds like the Ministry is purposely trying to deny the existence of telepaths and Seers and whatever else people are.”

“It does sound like that,” he allowed. “After all, the two telepaths I mentioned earlier were from several centuries ago. I can’t think of anyone from recent memory with that kind of ability... well, other than you.”

“Maybe they, the Ministry, are afraid. Maybe they don’t want people to know what they are... to be trained in that area,” Holly put in suddenly.

Blaise looked at her strangely. “Maybe.”

The two sat in troubled silence after that statement. Both thinking over what they had discussed. After a time, they left the study room, still considering the implications of the girl’s confession and the Ministry’s refusal to test their citizens for certain abilities.

AN: I know that the plot has sped up quite a bit, but I want to get on with it. I feel that I have adequately covered first year, so I am wrapping it up in the next chapter. I want to move on more quickly than I have been doing. Second year is when the story really starts to deviate from canon, and I just can’t wait any longer.

Thanks to *Hobbit-Tabby* for the beta.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks!

Chapter Ten: To Those Who Bring Harm

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Ten: For Those Who Bring Harm

“Voldemort.”

“What!” Theo exclaimed, his mouth gaping open in shock.

“The person who is truly after the stone is Voldemort. Quirrell is only trying to get it for him,” Holly explained patiently, glancing around the group.

All of her Slytherin friends plus the three Gryffindor first-years were gathered at a secluded table in the library, and they were all staring at her.

“Really? How do you know?” Hermione questioned earnestly.

Holly grimaced. She knew that Voldemort was after the Stone thanks to another dream she had had involving the death-shade and Firenze. The centaur had finally explained to her that the monster killing the unicorns and chasing after the two of them was nothing less than Voldemort himself.

She sighed, gazing down at the table, and finally explained the vivid dream-like experiences she had been having; she left out almost no details, not even Firenze’s belief that she was having these dreams due to her connection with another Seer. The only thing that Holly actually excluded was that the connection was caused by her telepathy, an ability that only Blaise knew she possessed.

Holly finally glanced upwards from the tabletop, gauging her friends’ reactions. Basically, they were completely and totally shocked. Everyone with the exception of Blaise, who was looking around in bemused silence, just continued staring at her.

“Well, say something,” she put in exasperatedly after a few moments of quiet gaping.

“Wow!” Gavin stated in awe.

The others nodded their agreements.

“Brilliant!” Ron whispered in wonderment, staring at her as though she were the most exciting thing since the invention of Quidditch.

Similar expressions were on the faces of all her friends.

Holly just looked at them blankly.

They were taking this surprisingly well considering that it wasn't everyday their friend told them that she was having visions of Voldemort.

Holly voiced this thought to the group.

“Well, it does sort of make sense,” Blaise replied.

“Yes,” Pansy added. “If anyone would dream about the Dark Lord, it'd probably be you.”

“And the connection makes a strange sort of sense, too,” Neville commented.

Hermione nodded. “You did vanquish him, after all. So it would be you to realise that he was trying to rise again,” she explained easily, a superior look on her face.

No one spoke much after that, not having an argument to combat Hermione's logic. They simply lingered for a while, tossing back and forth ideas about the Stone, Quirrell, and the Dark Lord.

The weeks leading up to her exams, Holly half expected the shade-Voldemort to burst in the door any moment. Either that or she thought Quirrell would just up and attack her on sight. As such, she was quite surprised when exams came and went. She had studied and prepared for each, so she could at least write off that particular worry. All in all, she felt that she had done rather well, especially in Charms thanks to her weekly visits with Professor Flitwick and Potions due to the fact that she studied with extra diligence so that her Head of House could find no fault in her work.

The morning of the last exam, Theo, Milli, and Draco had an incredibly large row in the Common Room, which undoubtedly had to do with the fact that Draco had made a comment about Autumn's Muggle parents. The three of them, as well as the other Slytherins, were glaring daggers at each other for the rest of the day. On one side were Draco and his two cronies. On the other were Theo, Milli, Gavin, the other first-years, and every single Slytherin Prefect, who all seemed to be bent on hexing Malfoy into next week.

Holly and Blaise, however, formed a third side, the one that was just too tired to argue anymore, and besides, they had far greater concerns. As such, after classes ended, the two snuck outside with the Gryffindors to sit near the lake, while a verbal battle undoubtedly raged within the Slytherin dorms.

Holly plopped down on the grass next to Hermione and toyed with the flute Hagrid had given her for Christmas. Cynthia Moon had taught her the basics of reading music, and the girl had been so taken with the idea of it that she had started carrying her little flute with her everywhere, sneaking a few minutes to practice.

Still, she didn't play it this time. Holly merely sat back in the grass and stared at the sky, watching as an owl flew overhead, crossing over Hagrid's cabin to her before heading for the school.

Suddenly, Holly sat up and stared at the hut. She jumped to her feet, running for its door. Blaise, Hermione, Ron, Neville exchanged a confused glance before following, and the four of them tore off after her. There, they confronted the giant about Norbert, Fluffy, and a mysterious stranger, hearts sinking as they learned that Hagrid had accidentally revealed the dog's weakness.

They quickly raced back to the castle, almost crashing into McGonagall just inside the Entrance Hall. When she had demanded to know what they were doing, they rapidly informed her that they needed to see Dumbledore and that the Stone was in danger. However, McGonagall swiftly dismissed their worries, stating that the headmaster was gone and that they were not to bother her again. She practically ordered them back to their Common Rooms.

Off in an unused corridor, they discussed their options. The Gryffindors were bent on spying on Professor Snape, while Holly and Blaise insisted that Quirrell was the real culprit.

After several heated moments of discussion, it was agreed that Hermione would spy on the Potions master outside of the teacher's lounge. Ron and Neville would wait in the library, planning their next moves, while Blaise went to fetch the other Slytherins from the Common Room. Though the Gryffindors didn't know it, he was also going to find Professor Snape, praying that the man was in the dungeons and not the teacher's lounge. Finally, Holly would go to the Defence corridor to spy on Quirrell. Blaise almost had a fit when he heard the last two parts, but a quick mental nudge reminded him that she could easily sense if Quirrell was nearby, so he gracefully acceded defeat.

Just as they made to part ways, Holly slipped her flute to Blaise, instructing him to use it on Fluffy if she failed in her mission to watch the Defence teacher. He stared at her, trying to get her to take it back, but she refused.

It was only later, when the entire fiasco was over, that Blaise realised it was almost as if she knew he was going to need it.

Holly quickly reached the Defence corridor, hiding just around the corner, and mentally searched for her professor. What she found astounded her.

Quirrell was there, lingering at the back of her mind. He was near, but she found it impossible to determine his exact location. Further, she could sense another presence, a tantalisingly familiar one, but only just. It was almost as though he were a great distance away; he was that faint, but the Slytherin knew him to be somewhere in the area.

It was all together very strange and a bit unnerving.

Holly snuck a look around the corner, but she didn't see anyone. She continued peeking, not noticing the slight shift of dust behind her. Unfortunately, what the girl also didn't see, not that she could, was the invisible Quirrell sneak up behind her.

Her mental senses barely had time to tingle a warning before the spell struck, sending her to the floor. She tried to roll to her feet, but Holly quickly discovered that she was paralyzed or in a full Body-Bind more like. And her eyes widened as Quirrell finally came into view, smirking down at her.

He rapidly cast more spells on her and levitated her down the hallway, thankfully keeping her upright. He must have also spelled her to be unnoticeable because none of the students they passed in the hallways on their way to the third floor seemed to even see her.

Holly's mind was reeling the entire time as she floated. Quirrell had captured her, and no one would be the wiser. He could sneak the two of them to the third floor, and her friends would never even know it!

Frantic for some kind of salvation, Holly felt her mind reach out automatically. Instantly she felt a connection to another person in the castle, green eyes glowing as the Slytherin realised who she was connected to. She now had a chance. It was a very slim one at that, though, since she had never actually spoken to anyone telepathically before. She had only received thoughts, never sent any.

Screwing up her strength, Holly tried a desperate gamble.

"Blaise," she mentally called, "Quirrell has me. We're on our way to the third floor!"

Blaise was just making his way to the Common Room when he heard Holly's mental scream. It took him a few seconds to realise it for what it was, and he hesitated, not knowing what to do.

Undoubtedly, Quirrell had gotten to her. Even now, she could be lying unconscious... or dead. He needed to get to her, but he also needed help. If the Defence professor could get her, then he could defeat Blaise as well.

Though, who could help him?

Ron?

Hermione?

Neville?

No, they were up against a fully trained wizard. There was no way they could win. They needed help, adult help. But who?

Not McGonagall, most definitely not.

Snape? No, there was still the chance that it was actually him.

And then it suddenly hit him!

Flitwick.

Blaise smiled grimly and tore through the hallways, ignoring the stares of those he passed. He barrelled up the stairs from the dungeon and was fast on his way to the Charms corridor. Just as he turned a corner, he ran smack into another person, sending both of them sprawling to the floor. Blaise quickly picked himself up and went to help the other person, but he froze when he recognised silvery eyes and platinum-blond hair.

Malfoy.

“Why are you in such a hurry?” the blond bit out in frustration, helping himself off of the floor.

Blaise didn’t answer; instead, he continued on his way... or, at least, tried to. A firm hand on his arm stopped him, and he whirled around.

“What’s wrong, Bl-Zabini?” Malfoy demanded.

“Nothing!” Blaise shouted, growling. “Now, let me go!” He wheezed, fighting to breathe. All the running he was doing was causing him to be rather short on air.

Malfoy sneered. “No, not until you tell me what is wrong.”

“I don’t have time for this!” Blaise yelled, shoving the other boy out of the way, but the blond wouldn’t relinquish his hold. “I have to get help! She’s in trouble!”

“Help? She’s in trouble?” Draco repeated with confusion, but his eyes suddenly lit up in understanding. “It’s Holly, isn’t it?” he asked, but he went on before the other boy could answer, “This has something to do with the Stone, doesn’t it? The one the others were talking about in the Common Room?”

“Yes,” Blaise bit out. “Quirrell is trying to steal it, and now, he has Holly. Dumbledore’s not here, and McGonagall didn’t believe us. I’m going to Flitwick for help. Now move!”

Malfoy abruptly let go, but before Blaise could go fetch the Charms professor, Draco halted him again.

“No... I’ll go. I’ll get Dumbledore, too. Send him an owl or something,” he stated quickly. “You go get the others and maybe some of the Prefects. They’ll help; you know that they will.”

Blaise eyed him for a minute, judging the blond’s sincerity. Apparently, he believed what he had just been told because he nodded his thanks and tore off for the Slytherin Common Room, leaving Draco behind.

Malfoy rapidly turned, resolve clearly written across his features, and made his way to the Charms corridor, certain that he would fulfil his mission.

Blaise, however, never made it to the dorms. Instead, he veered off to the library, finding Ron, Neville, and Hermione, who had gone there after Professor Snape had discovered her and forced her away. He rapidly told them that Holly had been found out, and that Quirrell was taking her with him on his way to the Stone, though he purposely left out how he had come by this knowledge.

The three Gryffindors eyed him in shock before immediately deciding to head Quirrell off at the third floor. Once more, Blaise found himself racing through Hogwarts Castle, silently vowing to himself as he wheezed his way up the stairs that he would get in better shape.

Just behind the door to Fluffy’s playpen, the four of them stared at the harp, which was lulling the beast to sleep, and knew that they were too late. After a moment of quick arguing, Hermione and Ron sent

Neville to fetch Professor Sprout since McGonagall hadn't believed them in the first place and because they still suspected Snape... or Quirrell in Blaise's case. Besides, Professor Flitwick already knew.

The harped stopped just as the door shut behind Neville, and Fluffy immediately started to awaken. However, Blaise remembered the flute and quickly played it, lulling the creature back to sleep. The remaining three first-years, the two Gryffindors and the Slytherin, went through the trap door, following after their demented professor and their captured friend.

They battled their way through the obstacles. Blaise's normally calm nature allowing him to remember that the Devil's Snare, which they had landed on after going through the opening, was weakened by light and fire. It took a bit of time for them to get through the next obstacle because only Blaise and Ron were decent flyers. Further, neither was trained to spot small objects, much like a Seeker was. Ron was always forced to play Keeper with his brothers, and Blaise didn't really like Quidditch.

Thankfully, the redhead's skill in chess got them through McGonagall's enormous set, but Ron had to sacrifice himself in order for Blaise to checkmate the king.

With one last desperate look at him, the remaining two charged through the door and up the next passageway. Both were incredibly worried about Ron, but they knew he would eventually be fine; Holly didn't have that luxury.

Thankfully, the next barrier was an already defeated troll, which they easily bypassed. Blaise and Hermione pushed through the next door and into the room, flames springing up to guard both the entrance behind them and the exit in front. To the side of the room was a table with seven differently shaped bottles, standing on it in a line with a piece of parchment next to them.

The pair quickly glanced through, realising that it wasn't a magical test at all.

"Brilliant," Blaise whispered.

Hermione looked at him. "It is. A logic puzzle," she mused. "A lot of the greatest wizards haven't got an ounce of logic; they'd be stuck in here forever."

"So could we," he informed her, studying the parchment.

The two of them looked over it for several moments before Blaise's eyes suddenly lit up.

"Got it!" he shouted.

"Me, too."

Hermione grasped the round bottle that would take them backwards, while Blaise fetched the tiny bottle that would allow them to go forward. However, there was a slight problem. There was only enough for one.

"You drink that," he told her, pointing to the round bottle. "No, listen," the Slytherin stated fiercely, stopping her protests. "Go back and get Ron. Grab brooms from the flying-key room; they'll get you out of the trapdoor and passed Fluffy. Then, go straight to a teacher, several in fact. It doesn't matter which ones. Just bring them here. Or try the owlery and send Hedwig to Dumbledore; we really need him." He inhaled shakily.

"I might be able to hold Quirrell off for a while, but I'm no match for him really." Blaise added softly, "and Holly will undoubtedly need healing."

"But, Blaise, what if You-Know-Who's with them?"

"Well, Holly was lucky once, wasn't she? Maybe her luck will hold out for the both of us," he informed her, steeling his face and quieting the urge to tremble.

Hermione's lip quivered, and she suddenly ran forward and threw her arms around him.

"Hermione!"

“Blaise, you’re a great wizard, you know. Just bring her back safely.” She then let go, backing away.

The boy nodded stiffly, cementing his resolve. “You drink first,” he said.

Hermione took a long swig from the round bottle and shuddered. And then, she was gone.

The Slytherin took a deep breath and fingered the smallest bottle. He turned to face the black flames at the exit.

“Here I come,” he stated firmly, and he drained the little bottle in one gulp.

His insides felt like ice as he replaced the bottle on the table and started for the exit. Yet, just as Blaise was about to pass through the fire, an invisible force pulled him back, and he all but crashed into something solid, landing almost painfully on his bottom. He glanced up, ignoring the wavers in his vision, looking straight into two pair of eyes. One set was the fierce brown of Professor Flitwick. The other the blazing blue of the headmaster.

Sometime earlier, Holly breezed through the obstacles, seeing as how she wasn’t the one actually battling them. Quirrell quickly extracted them from the devilish plant as soon as they landed, not even needing to repel it. Further, he simply summoned the correct key to the door, not bothering with the brooms. He didn’t even attempt to play his way across the chessboard, simply choosing to levitate the both of them over the board, stunning the pieces when they tried to stop him. He defeated the troll with a single burst of sickly green light. The only obstacle that actually held him up was the logical exercise with the potions.

He paced back and forth, the still spelled girl by the table, casting discrete glances at the paper detailing the puzzle. Just as she reached the conclusion that the smallest bottle was the key to going forward, his head snapped up, and Quirrell marched to the table, grasping the tiny bottle. He stared at it for an instant and glanced at Holly before flicking his wand and multiplying the amount within. He quickly forced it down her unresponsive throat and tipped his head

back, taking the rest. They stepped to the door, the logic puzzle resetting itself as they left.

A moment later, they were beyond the fire, standing in front of the Mirror of Erised.

Holly awoke slowly, consciousness returning in waves. She looked around bleakly, staring at the blurs and finally realising that she was in the Hospital Wing. She only wondered about that occurrence for a second before it all came back to her.

In her mind, there was Quirrell with Voldemort coming out of the back of his head. Holly herself was released from the spell, staring into the mirror, the Philosopher's Stone dropping into her pocket. There were her lies but Voldemort knowing the truth. There was his offer to bring back her parents and Quirrell finally touching her with his bare hands when she refused. Holly remembered his attempt to harm her and his horribly burnt fingers. Finally, she recalled grabbing on to his face when he tried to curse her.

Holly gasped as it all flooded back. She immediately tried to sit up, belatedly noticing that someone was attempting to help her. After a second, she felt her glasses pushed onto her nose and pillows moved behind her, propping her up. She turned to glance at her helper.

And Albus Dumbledore smiled and looked straight back at her.

"Professor," the Slytherin stated excitedly. "The Stone... Blaise, Hermione, Ron, and Neville--"

"Oh, don't worry, dear child," he calmly said to her. "Everything is fine. Voldemort does not have the Stone. Your friends are safe and healthy. Blaise was just about to go face Voldemort when I pulled him back and went after you. But, I dare say, you were doing quite a wonderful job of it." He beamed at her. "In fact, the only one who was in any real danger was you. You've been unconscious for the last four days." He grinned at her dazed look. "And the Stone... well, it has been destroyed."

Holly gaped at him, emerald eyes wide. "Destroyed? Sir, but what about your friend Nicholas and his wife?"

"Oh, you know about Nicholas?" Dumbledore questioned, sounding quite delighted. "You did do the thing properly, didn't you? Well, Nicholas and I have had a little chat and agreed it's all for the best."

"Professor, that means his wife and he will die, won't they?"

"Yes, they have enough Elixir stored to set their affairs in order, and then, yes, they will die." Dumbledore almost smiled before he noted the sad look on Holly's face. "To one as young as you, I'm sure it seems incredible, but to Nicholas and Perenelle, it is really like going to bed after a very, **very** long day. After all, to the well-organised mind, death is but the next great adventure," he whispered, trying to comfort her. "You know, the Stone was really not such a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all. The trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them."

The Slytherin sat in contemplatively silence for several moments before she finally spoke again.

"Sir? I've been thinking... even with the Stone gone won't Vol... er, You-Know-Who--"

"Call him Voldemort, Holly," the headmaster corrected gently. "Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself."

Holly nodded before continuing her train of thought. "Yes, sir. Well, Voldemort can still find other ways of coming back, can't he? He isn't really gone."

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "No, Holly, he is not gone. He's still out there somewhere, perhaps looking for another body to share. Not being truly alive, he cannot be killed. You have delayed his return to power, but it will merely take someone else who is prepared to fight what seems a losing battle next time, and if he is delayed again and again... why, he may never return to power."

She thought about this for a moment before something suddenly occurred to her. "Sir, what about Professor Quirrell?" Holly asked slowly, but noting Dumbledore's expression she hesitated. "He's not dead, is he?" She looked at him beseechingly. "Please, tell me the truth."

"The truth." Dumbledore sighed. "It is a beautiful and terrible thing... and should therefore be treated with great caution. However, I shall answer your question as truthfully as I can." He gazed at her sombrely. "I'm afraid that Professor Quirrell is in fact dead, my dear girl," he answered as Holly looked on helplessly. "Voldemort abandoned his servant to die so that he might escape."

She nodded absentmindedly, too absorbed in the knowledge that the man was dead. Even though he had tried to harm her, she still felt guilty. But then, that was what separated her from Voldemort. He had no conscience, and she did.

'Why did he die?' Holly desperately wanted to ask. 'I didn't hurt him that badly.'

However, before she could voice her thoughts to the headmaster, an unbidden memory surfaced in her mind. It was a passage she remembered from Hogwarts: A History, which supposedly dealt with a curse the Founders had placed on the castle.

*Enter those for which yearn
Knowledge, wisdom... who seek to learn.
But heed this warning, friend and guest,
For those who bring harm with their quest:
Your deeds will be sent back, three times three.
As we will it, so mote it be.*

Perhaps Quirrell had brought his death upon himself by seeking to do harm. Yet, there was no real way of ever knowing.

Holly snapped out of her thoughts as she heard Dumbledore cough.

"Sorry, Headmaster," she murmured apologetically. "My thoughts wandered."

Dumbledore smiled sadly. "I can understand, child." He gazed at her intently for a moment before continuing, "Now, I believe that there are several other things that we need to discuss."

The headmaster quickly covered the events following the girl's kidnapping and Voldemort's attempt at obtaining the Stone. He told her of how Ron, Hermione, and Blaise had gone after her, Neville going back for help. He also explained that Blaise was the only one preparing to enter the final room but that he and Professor Flitwick had stopped the boy. Additionally, Dumbledore mentioned that it had been an owl from Draco Malfoy which had led him back to the castle. Further, that Draco had alerted Professor Flitwick to the danger she was in.

The headmaster even explained exactly how Holly had gotten the Stone out of the mirror, which occurred because she wanted to find it but not use it. Dumbledore also touched upon why the Killing curse had originally back-fired on Voldemort, telling her that her mother had died to save her. He also talked about the Invisibility Cloak and Professor Snape's on-going hatred of James Potter due to the fact that her father had once saved the Potions master's life.

Holly accepted all of this information readily, only becoming confused during one part of the discussion. Dumbledore was talking about her mother and the back-fired killing curse, when his thoughts mentioned a single, strange word. But it disappeared almost as quickly as the headmaster had thought it. She could not discern anything about the word or the circumstances surrounding its appearance in the headmaster's thoughts, but she knew without a doubt that he had thought it.

Try as she might, the girl could glean nothing else from the man, just that single word. It was later on when she was back in her dorm room that she laid awake, wondering why he had thought it.

Prophecy? Why would the headmaster think about a prophecy when he told her about Voldemort?

However, no answers were forthcoming.

Later, the same day that Holly awoke in the Hospital Wing, her friends came to visit. Madam Pomfrey almost had a coronary when she saw the huge amount of people calling on her patient, which included all of Holly's Slytherin first-year friends plus Gavin, Ron, Hermione, and Neville. Unfortunately for the nurse, she was unable to remove the visitors since Headmaster Dumbledore had sent a note declaring that they were all allowed to visit Holly.

The girl couldn't help but laugh at the entire situation.

Soon enough, all of her friends were settled around her in various spots: some in the hospital chairs, others on the surrounding beds, and even two at the foot of her own. Blaise, though, took the first seat available; he sat next to Holly, sharing her pillow and leaning back on her headboard. He smiled softly at her, while the others were all searching for seats, whispering about how worried he had been. He gently put his arm around her waist and hugged her. He noticed that, for the very first time, she didn't even flinch at the contact.

They were all quick to tell Holly about the rumours running rampant around the school, such as the story that Quirrell had kidnapped her so that she could be a human sacrifice. Or the one that said the professor was the reincarnation of Salazar Slytherin, and he was ridding the school of half-bloods and Muggleborns, starting with Holly. Yet, it was one of those rare occasions when the true story was even more bizarre and exciting than the wild rumours.

She quickly told them everything: Quirrell, the mirror, the Stone, and Voldemort. All of her friends were a very good audience; they gasped in all the right places, and when Holly told them what was under the professor's turban, Hermione, Pansy, and Theo screamed out loud.

Hagrid came in soon after Holly's story dwindled to an end. The giant blubbered and all but threw himself on her tiny shoulder, crushing her beneath his weight. After her friends had finally managed to brisk him off of her, he handed Holly a small package and beamed down at her. Inside was a photo album filled with pictures of her parents.

The visit was soon over after that, mostly due to the fact that Madam Pomfrey had all but thrown her friends out. The nurse ordered the

Slytherin to rest and was about to shut the infirmary door when another person quietly walked in.

Green eyes widened as Holly noticed who it was, but she remained quiet as he walked to the annoyed nurse and hand her a note before coming over to the girl's bed.

"Hello," Draco Malfoy greeted nervously.

Holly looked at him blankly. "Er... hello," she said after a moment, gesturing for him to sit.

Draco nodded and took the chair next to her bed, staring at the ground for several moments. Undoubtedly, the two would have sat in silence for the rest of forever had Holly not prompted him.

"Was there something you wanted to talk to me about?" she questioned.

"Yes..." he trailed off.

She mentally rolled her eyes. "Well?"

Draco inhaled sharply before launching into an explanation of how his father had been a Death Eater in Voldemort's inner circle but that Lucius Malfoy had been forced into it. He also whispered that the parents of Crabbe, Goyle, and Pansy, not to mention Theo's uncle, had all been forced into the Dark Lord's service as well. When Holly questioned why Pansy and Theo could associate with Muggleborns and Muggle-lovers, Draco blithely informed her that their family had not been in the inner circle. If the Dark Lord were to return, he would severely punish the Notts and Parkinsons for their supposed treachery, but they would be left alive. That was not the case for the family members of Voldemort's elite.

The girl stared at him blankly before reaching out her senses and searching his thoughts. And there it was, bright as day, for all the world to see. Had they been telepaths.

Draco Malfoy was telling the truth. He was actually telling the truth.

He had been a horrible git the entire year, not because it was his true personality, though it might actually have been. In truth, it was because he was afraid. He was deathly afraid that the Dark Lord would return and kill his family for associating with Muggleborns and the like.

“As far as excuses for bad behaviour go,” Holly said after a moment, “that’s a pretty good one. Still, it doesn’t quite justify all of your actions. You could just ignore Muggleborns; you don’t have to torment them,” she asserted fiercely.

Draco flinched. “True... but I was afraid. I thought that he might come back and kill us for even allowing them to exist.”

She could see his point, but that still didn’t completely excuse his behaviour.

“We have no idea if he ever will come back,” Holly stated heatedly. “As long as there are people who work against him, there’s still hope that he won’t, so you can stop being such a prat.”

“What if he **does** come back?” Draco questioned nervously, his silvery eyes widening.

Holly shushed him, fearing that Madam Pomfrey would overhear. “Then, he comes back, Draco. You can’t live your life in fear,” she explained, hesitantly laying her hand on his. “Believe me, I know.”

Draco quivered. “He could kill my entire family,” he murmured, unconsciously running his thumb over the back of her hand.

“Yes, he could,” she stated, choosing to go with the undiminished truth. “But at the same time, by acting out as you were, you’re drawing attention to yourself. Merlin only knows what he or someone else would do about that,” she asserted.

Seeing him blanch, Holly continued in a much gentler tone, “Why don’t you just ignore them since you can’t make nice? Just avoid them and don’t say anything; keep your head down.”

He nodded slowly, thinking it over. "I guess that could work," he acquiesced. "What about Autumn? She's one of my year-mates, after all."

"Make an exception for her. She's Slytherin, so that has to count for something. Or you could explain it to her. After you apologise, that is."

Draco nodded reluctantly. "I was planning on it anyway. I was going to do it for the Weasel... er... Weasley," he corrected at Holly's narrowed eyes, "and Longbottom as well. Maybe Granger, too, but I didn't really bother her."

"And what about us? The other Slytherins?" she asked.

He hesitated. "I already apologised to the House. I did it earlier, this morning before breakfast. It's just you left actually, and I'm sorry, Holly." Draco trembled faintly. "I'm so sorry; it was wrong of me. I was afraid, but that doesn't excuse anything. I... can you ever forgive me?" he pleaded, his eyes begging her.

Holly knew her answer before he had even finished, but she waited for a moment just to let him stew.

"Yes, I can and do forgive you." She squeezed the hand she still held. "Oh, by the way, thanks for telling Professor Flitwick and owling Dumbledore. Undoubtedly, Quirrell would have gotten me if they hadn't shown up."

He stared at her blankly and nodded.

She smiled. "Friends?"

Draco sighed in relief, his eyes very bright. "Friends," he affirmed, squeezing back.

Holly made her way down to the end-of-year feast alone that night. Madam Pomfrey had insisted on a last minute check-up, so the Great Hall was already full, decked out in a giant mesh of Gryffindor and Slytherin colours. The banners were a mixture of green, red, silver, and gold with lions and serpents on them.

When Holly entered the Great Hall, there was a sudden hush, and then, everybody started talking loudly all at once. She ignored them and snagged a vacant seat between Blaise and Draco, who were currently eyeing each other peculiarly.

Fortunately, the whispers soon died away because Dumbledore arrived.

"Another year gone!" the headmaster said cheerfully. "And I must trouble you with an old man's wheezing waffle before we sink our teeth into our delicious feast. What a year it has been! Hopefully, your heads are all a little fuller than they were, and you have the whole summer ahead to get them nice and empty before next year starts." He beamed at them.

"Now, as I understand it, the House Cup needs awarding, but first, let me indulge," he added. "Slytherin House, even though they have lost their most recent match to Hufflepuff, stands in the lead for the Quidditch Cup and has therefore won it."

The Slytherin table burst into applause, happy over their victory. Holly, however, shifted slightly. They had suffered their worst defeat in over three hundred years because she had missed the match three days previous, not that it was really her fault since she had been unconscious at the time.

"With that settled," Dumbledore went on, "the House points stand thus: In fourth place, Hufflepuff, with three hundred and fifty-two points. In third, Ravenclaw has four hundred and twenty-six. Lastly, tied for first, Slytherin and Gryffindor each have four hundred and seventy-two."

A storm of cheering and stamping broke out at the Gryffindor and Slytherin tables, although there was a slight undertone of tension as they eyed each other warily.

"Yes, yes, well done both of you," Dumbledore stated, his eyes twinkling. "However, recent events must be taken into account."

The room went very still.

“Ahem,” the headmaster continued, “I have a few last-minute points to dish out. Let me see. Yes...”

McGonagall and Snape both looked at him wearily.

Dumbledore merely grinned. “First, to the Slytherin first-years, for discovering one of the best kept of Hogwarts’ many secrets and for solving a nearly impossible mystery, I award forty points.” His smile grew at the explosion of noise that occurred at the Slytherin table. “And to one Ravenclaw first-year – I believe you know which one – for much the same reasons, I award ten points.”

All the members of Ravenclaw glanced around, trying to figure out to whom Dumbledore was referring. Finally, an expression of understanding collectively dawned on their faces, and they turned to pat Gavin on the back, only to discover that he was sitting with the Slytherins.

The Slytherins, on the other hand, were on the verge of exploding with glee because they were now ahead in the points’ race. They were just beginning to scream with delight, when the headmaster effectively silenced them.

“Second,” Dumbledore called out over the crowd, “to Mr. Ronald Weasley...”

Ron went purple in the face, looking rather like a radish with a bad sunburn.

Dumbledore seemed not to notice because he carried on blithely, “For the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years, I award Gryffindor House fifty points.”

Gryffindor table exploded with applause and cheer because they now thought that they had won the House Cup.

Percy could be heard telling the other Prefects, “My brother, you know! My youngest brother! Got past McGonagall’s giant chess set!”

After several minutes of uninterrupted cheering, Dumbledore managed to quiet them. At last, there was silence again.

“Third, to Miss Hermione Granger, for the use of cool logic in the face of fire, I award Gryffindor House fifty points. Additionally, to Mr. Neville Longbottom,” the headmaster’s said, facing brightening even more. “For being brave enough to admit that you needed assistance and for being willing to obtain it, even if it meant leaving others behind, I award fifty points.”

Both Hermione and Neville looked floored. The girl dropped her head into her hands, and Holly strongly suspected that she was crying. Neville, on the other hand, simply gazed around in disbelief. He had never even won a single point before.

Meanwhile, Gryffindor cheered again, just as loudly as before, but it soon died down as they noticed the headmaster’s expression.

“Fourth, to Mr. Blaise Zabini,” Dumbledore put in, and the room went deadly quiet. “For a quick mind and a ready wit, as well as an undying loyalty, I award Slytherin House fifty points.”

The Slytherins clapped loudly, some shifting in their seats anxiously. They were hoping that Dumbledore would award them more points, and they weren’t disappointed.

“Fifth, to Miss Holly Potter,” he inserted with a wide grin, and everyone held their collective breaths. “For pure nerve and outstanding courage, not to mention a great deal of Slytherin cunning, I award Slytherin House sixty points.”

The din was deafening. The people adding up the points mentally suddenly looked stumped.

“Wait,” someone called, suspiciously sounding like Alé Zabini-Rookwood, “they’re still tied!”

The Hall broke out into hundreds of whispers, but Dumbledore ignored them all. He simply continued smiling. When the din began to quiet several moments later, he spoke.

“There are all kinds of courage,” he stated sombrely. “It takes a great deal of courage to stand up to our enemies and just as much to stand up to our friends.” He paused, glancing around. “But it takes even

more to stand up to ourselves, to admit that we are wrong and try to rectify our mistakes. I, therefore, award ten points to Mr. Draco Malfoy.”

Draco was stunned.

So was everyone else. They had all heard about his argument with Holly months ago, and a few knew about their reconciliation; the rest would hear about it soon enough. However, almost no one knew why it had occurred.

Almost as one, every eye in the Hall turned to Draco, but he was too shocked to even notice.

Finally, Holly nudged him, and he turned to look at her. She simply smiled and began to clap, Blaise and the other first-years quickly joining in.

All year Draco had been terrorising the other students and irritating Slytherin House to no end, but all was apparently forgiven because soon the entire table erupted in applause. The other Houses were slow to join in but eventually did, taking Dumbledore’s words to heart.

Soon, the Great Hall was filled with thunderous applause.

“Which means,” Dumbledore called over the noise, “we need a little change of decoration.” He clapped his hands.

In an instant, the mixed green/red and gold/silver hangings lost the scarlet and gold, simply retaining the Slytherin colours. The giant lion vanished and the serpent grew larger, beaming down at the students and giving sly winks. Professor Snape was shaking McGonagall’s hand, a horrible forced smile on her face. Holly caught the man’s eye, noticing a strange glimmer in it, but she was under no delusions that their relationship would truly change. He would still hate her, but hopefully, he would be a little less vocal about it.

It was the best evening of the girl’s life, better than winning at Quidditch, Christmas, or knocking out mountain trolls. She would never, ever forget this night.

The last day of school passed quickly. They received their exam scores back; everyone passed, including Vincent and Greg, who actually did rather well. Better than Ron, in fact.

Holly and Blaise came in at the top of the Slytherin first-years, closely followed by Theo and Draco. Gavin was number one for the Ravenclaws by a rather large margin, which was very surprising, especially considering the fact that Holly rarely saw him actually study. He did his homework, but that seemed to be it, unless he studied when she wasn't around.

As expected, Hermione had beat out the other Gryffindors as well. Yet, it was impossible to know her class ranking in relation to the others because the score was ranked within the Houses, not the entire school. They could compare their actual exam scores, but there was no way of knowing who was the top of all the first-years.

Soon enough, everyone's belongings were packed. Trevor was found lurking in the boy's toilet. Gavin was actually seen in the Ravenclaw Common Room. It was time to go home.

The first-years made their way out to the train, where Holly bid goodbye to the Gryffindors before going to sit in a compartment with Blaise, Draco, Milli, and Pansy. The group played rousing games of Exploding Snap and cast a few last minute spells before the train pulled into King's Cross.

Holly grimaced as she saw the Dursleys. She waved to her friends, receiving strict instructions to write them, and hugged Blaise, who whispered in her ear for her to owl him if her relatives tried anything. Holly was about to walk over to them, but a hand on her wrist stopped her. She gazed up and noticed Blaise smiling back at her. The boy led her over to a couple standing by the wall, a dark-skinned and incredibly beautiful woman and a very pale, scholarly man.

Mr. and Mrs. Zabini smiled warmly at both of them, hugging first Blaise and then Holly herself. In fact, Blaise's mother, Erendiria, squeezed the girl as though she were her long-lost daughter. Thankfully, Dante, Mr. Zabini, was a bit more sedate about it, even if he did beam repeatedly at her.

Twenty minutes of pleasantries and an invitation to visit during the holiday later, Holly was finally making her way over to her relatives. Vernon merely scowled when he saw her before turning to go to the car. Petunia sniffed and followed in his wake. Dudley squealed like a pig, his hands on his incredibly large bottom, and ran... well, pounded after his parents.

They didn't even greet her.

However, Holly wasn't the least bit bothered. They weren't her friends; they weren't her family. So it just didn't matter to her. And if they tried anything this summer, the consequences would be dire. Her friends and their parents would ensure that.

The Slytherin smirked as she followed them from the station and was ordered into the car. She sniffed at the Dursleys' rudeness, but the wonderful thought, the one that had occurred to her as Professor Flitwick handed out the sheets of parchment forbidding magic during the holiday, still resounded in her mind.

The Dursleys didn't know she wasn't allowed to use magic during the summer. Oh, this would be an interesting holiday indeed.

Finite Incantatem

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks!

Chapter Eleven: Child of Fate

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Eleven: Child of Fate

Holly Potter was having a decidedly wretched summer. Oh, it hadn't begun that way. In fact, it had started out rather well.

At first, her relatives, the Dursleys of Number Four, Privet Drive, were far too afraid of her to even look in her direction. As such, the Slytherin had happily finished her summer assignments for school, in the first week no less, and had read books to her little heart's content. She had joyfully written her school mates and other correspondents, Hagrid and Remus Lupin. Even the fact that she had yet to receive a reply from anyone could not dissuade her happy mood.

This had sadly all changed a month into break. It was just days after her birthday, one in which she received no presents, when she came across a strange creature just outside the house. This being, which Holly later discovered was a demented house-elf, plus some taunting from Dudley with a dinner party thrown in all managed to cumulate in the girl receiving a warning from the Ministry when she hadn't even used her wand. From this, her lovely relatives had discovered that she wasn't allowed to do magic during the summer and had all but thrown her in her room, locking her inside.

Thankfully, she had a few of her books with her. Still, she desired to leave her room, if only to go to the loo, shower, and eat. It also didn't help that she had read all of her books several times, and she longed to venture to the library a few streets over, which she hadn't had a chance to visit this summer.

Nevertheless, Holly's wretched time took a decided turn upward late one night, just short of a week into her imprisonment. That night, she was dreaming that she was caged animal in the zoo, only to wake and find the Weasley brothers outside of her window. It took a few minutes for her brain to register what she was seeing, but after pinching herself quite hard, she finally concluded that she was indeed witnessing a flying car.

Fred and George, apparently understanding her incredulous expression, took the opportunity to remove the bars on her windows, courtesy of Vernon Dursley. They then entered her window and came up to her bed, which she was still sitting on.

“Hello, Holly,” George greeted pleasantly.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Fred carried on.

Holly, snapping out of her shock, smiled widely and hopped out of bed. She suddenly became very conscious of the fact that she was only in her nightdress. However, neither Fred nor George even blinked at her attire. But Ron, who was still hovering outside, flushed bright red.

“I guess you’re here to free me, aren’t you?” the Slytherin asked quickly.

“Yep,” George answered, reaching out to pat her on her shoulder.

“When you didn’t answer our letters, we started to worry,” Fred stated, repeating his twin’s action. The two continued to talk as they moved to the bolted bedroom door.

“We even wrote Blaise. He was all for coming with us--”

--but we felt that we should hurry up and get you,” George replied, looking around. “Where are your things?”

“My trunk? It’s in the cupboard under the stairs. Most of my things are in there, besides a few odds and ends... and Hedwig,” Holly quickly answered, indicating her snowy and encaged owl. “But careful because some of the stairs creak. The third from the top, the fifth, and the next to last on the bottom.”

The pair nodded. “Don’t worry about your trunk,” Fred put in, pulling out a hairpin. “We’ll get it. Just change your clothes and get whatever’s in here.” He moved to unlock the bolts, noticing the marks on the lock and turning to look at her. “You’ve been working on it.”

It was a statement not a question.

Holly blinked. “Oh, yes. I managed to get it unlocked, but I didn’t have anywhere else to go, so I just nipped into the kitchen.”

The twins exchanged a look.

“Well, don’t worry about that now,” Fred assured her.

“Yah, you’re coming home with us,” George declared.

Holly smiled.

Within seconds, the twins had the door opened and were heading downstairs. The girl watched them for a moment before turning around and instantly moving Hedwig’s cage to the mattress before diving under her bed. She removed the few books she had stashed, her wand, and two changes of clothes, piling everything next to the cage. She quickly selected a comfortable pair of pants and a shirt and was about to strip when she remembered the other Weasley boy.

Holly’s head whipped around, and she stared out the window, noticing the boy watching her closely.

“Ron, could you turn around?” she asked quickly.

The silent redhead nodded but didn’t speak. Quietly berating herself and shaking her head with exasperation as he faced a different direction, Holly reached out her mental senses. She shouldn’t have forgotten that he was there, but in the excitement, she had. Such a thing was not good, especially in the Dursley household.

Holly quickly changed, carefully covering the still yellowish bruises on her back. She was just pulling on her trainers, which had been under the bed as well, when Fred and George returned with her trunk. The three of them piled her remaining things inside, the Slytherin hearing Vernon give a great snort down the hall as she loaded the last of her books. With a bit of assistance from Ron, who was pulling, they hefted it into the boot of the car. Holly heard another grunt and the shift of a mattress as Vernon climbed out of bed, presumably to go to the bathroom. Her eyes widened as she realised that he would probably first check that the door to her room was still locked. She all but forced Fred and George into the car and was about to climb in herself when she suddenly remembered her owl.

It was excellent timing, too, as Hedwig was about to screech in protest.

Holly heard heavy steps thumping down the hallway toward her still opened door as she dashed to her bed, grabbed Hedwig's cage, and raced back to the window. A shadow moved into her doorway as she passed the bird to Ron and stepped onto the window sill.

Vernon, slow though he might be, instantly recognised the situation for what it was. An escape attempt.

As such, he thundered forward and attempted to grab her, shouting for Petunia the entire time. Yet, he was too late because Holly launched herself into the car, slamming the door shut into his face.

With a triumphant shout, the twins revved the engine and escaped into the clouded sky.

Holly quickly related the entire story of her imprisonment to the Weasley brothers, mentioning the letters she had never received, the bizarre incident with the house-elf, and the disastrous dinner party. The boys' expressions darkened as she recounted the incident, glossing over the fact that Vernon had been very forceful when taking her to her room. The only parts they seemed slightly confused about were those concerning Dobby.

"What was it again?" Ron asked quickly, finally speaking.

"Some crazed creature," Holly said from the backseat as she picked the lock on Hedwig's cage. This particular skill was one she had learned long ago, and it was dead useful in the Dursley household.

"I think he said he was a house-elf – Dobby was his name, I believe," she finished, opening the cage door and letting her beautiful owl out. "He kept blathering on about bad happenings at Hogwarts, as if the ones last year weren't awful enough, and how I shouldn't return. Then, he would just hit himself on the head with whatever was handy. He almost cracked the spine on one of my books before I took it away from him," she commented, noticing the strange expression on George's face.

"What?" she asked him hurriedly. "I didn't want him to abuse himself. I tried to keep him from doing it, but he just wouldn't listen. I even

asked him to sit down calmly, and he started crying on about how it was wrong for me to treat him as an equal.”

“Oh, I wasn’t trying to make you feel bad, Holly,” George clarified. “It’s just that this Dobby sounds like an extreme version of most house-elves. They’re strange creatures. Like to work all the time, hate taking breaks or not doing something, and they love to punish themselves for supposed indiscretions.”

Holly looked intrigued if a bit disturbed. “So they’re not all complete masochists?”

“No,” Fred admonished with a laugh. “They just like to punish themselves if they do something wrong, although their definition of wrong is slightly different from our own.”

“Who would send a house-elf to warn me? Or did he do it on his own?” Holly questioned.

“Don’t know,” Fred responded. “Do you?”

She thought it over. “No, I don’t even know why he really came. His explanation was pretty vague. As for who, all my friends would have just written me,” she replied, eyes flashing. “I suppose some of them must have house-elves. I’d say that wealthy wizarding families would.”

“Yeah,” George went on, thinking it over. “Oh, you’re right; mostly rich or old families have them. Our friend Alé has some. We saw them when we went to her birthday party two summers ago.” He glanced at the compass. “We’re going too far to the east, Fred.”

“Hey, I remember that, though theirs were much nicer than this Dobby sounds,” Fred stated, eyeing the compass and shifting the steering wheel of the car. “They were dead helpful. Alé and her family treat them very well. But not all families do.”

George shook his head in agreement. “True.” At Holly’s expression, he continued, “You see, Holly, they like to work for families or organizations. You know, places like Hogwarts--”

“Hogwarts has house-elves?” Ron interrupted, wide-eyed. He leaned forward to better listen to the conversation.

George rolled his eyes. “Honestly, Ron, how else would the castle ever get clean; how do you the students are fed?” he admonished his brother.

The youngest Weasley sat back, a thoughtful expression on his face.

“Anyway,” George went on, “house-elves like being ‘bonded’, as they call it. They love to work, and bonding to a family or a place assures them that. But some people take advantage of it and treat them like slaves, instead of thinking creatures that just like to serve. They even beat and do other, more horrible, things to their house-elves.”

“That’s terrible,” Holly declared, shuddering at the thought. She knew what it felt like to be treated like a punching bag and a slave.

Fred shrugged and again checked the compass. “I know, but with Ministry laws and wizarding attitudes the way they are, there isn’t really anything anyone can do about it.”

“Save change the laws,” the Slytherin said weakly, stifling the urge to be upset.

George nodded. “But the chances of that are slim to none. The Ministry’s set in their ways. They don’t believe in change of any sort, except back to the supposedly ‘Old Ways.’ But in their minds, those are ways where wizards were supreme.”

“That’s bollocks,” Holly stated fiercely. “Anyone who can read a history book would know that isn’t true. According to Hogwarts: A History, the magical races used to be on roughly equal footing and were allies and friends.”

“Yeah,” George said calmly. “But wizards started slowly taking over. I’m not sure how, though; nobody really wrote it down. Makes me wonder what was really going on.”

They quieted after that, thinking it over. They rode the rest of the way in comfortable silence, the twins occasionally telling Holly jokes. Just

as the sky was taking on a decidedly pinkish tint, Fred and George suddenly smiled and started descending.

They landed the car gently just outside what appeared to be a pigpen that had several storeys and rooms added here, there, and everywhere. It was, undoubtedly, held up by magic. The girl actually liked the Weasley home, however strange and messy its appearance, because it was everything the Dursley home was not.

Disorganised, chaotic, friendly. Homey.

The four were just approaching the house, called The Burrow according to Fred, when a plump, redheaded woman stalked up to them and started berating the Weasley boys. Holly had to stifle a slight groan as recognised the woman, who remarkably resembled a sabre-toothed tiger; she was the same one who had lectured the Slytherin on the train last year. Holly had forgotten that she was the boys' mother, Molly Weasley.

However, her mounting nervousness was in vain because Mrs. Weasley didn't seem to remember Holly at all, a fact that relieved her greatly. The woman simply whirled to her, stating that she didn't blame her in the least for her boys' bad behaviour and how she should come have a spot of breakfast. The girl reluctantly agreed and was led by a beaming Mrs. Weasley into a very cluttered kitchen.

Breakfast was an interesting affair to say the least, especially when Arthur Weasley returned from a night of Ministry raids. He didn't immediately spot her, but once he did, he was astounded by her presence and peppered her with questions about Muggles. The meal became even stranger when the youngest Weasley child and only girl, Ginny, came bounding down the stairs. She took one look at Holly and immediately became a very fascinating shade of red, much the same colour of Gryffindor House.

It took all of the Slytherin girl's self-control not to fidget under the constant attention of Mr. Weasley and his daughter. Further, it didn't really help matters that every time Holly glanced in Ron's direction, he did strange things. Like knock over dishes or spill juice all over himself.

All in all, Holly was quite relieved when breakfast was over, and she was able to escape to the garden with the twins and a red-faced Ron. What happened next was probably one of the strangest experiences of her life, including facing a troll or seeing Voldemort sticking out the back of Quirrell's head. She helped de-gnome a garden, which basically meant she picked up a gnome, spun it around, and let it fly.

Soon enough, the morning and the afternoon passed, and it was finally time for bed. A nervous Ron gave her the grand tour that only lasted about ten minutes before returning her to Ginny's room, where she would be staying.

"I know that it isn't much," he commented, referring to the house and Ginny's outlandishly decorated and pink room.

Holly, however, smiled.

"I think it's brilliant," she responded, waving her hand to encompass the entire area and clearly meaning the house, not the bedroom.

Ron flushed bright red.

Over the next week, Holly quickly learned that life at the Burrow was anything but boring and that she rather enjoyed being there. Every meal, she was forced to sit next to Mr. Weasley and answer questions about Muggles. The twins constantly caused mayhem, and it wasn't unusual to hear loud explosions from their room. Mrs. Weasley forced her to eat third helpings at every sitting and continuously went on about her clean and neat nature, something that seemed to astound the woman. Percy, who she had had almost no contact with before, soon discovered a kindred spirit and engaged her in constant discussion about Charms, a subject he seemed to love. Even shy and quiet Ginny was gradually coming out of her shell.

Yet, the oddest and most interesting thing by far was the fact that everyone seemed to like her, something she usually only associated with Slytherin House.

Regardless, Holly simply loved the Burrow.

The only truly disturbing thing about the Weasley home and clan was actually the one person Holly should be the most comfortable around. Ron had acted peculiarly the night she had been rescued from the Dursleys, and he had become increasingly nervous around her. He constantly knocked over things whenever she was around and actually put his elbow in the butter dish when she asked him to pass the toast one morning. Further, every time she looked at him, he would turn an incredibly interesting shade of red, looking like a radish with a horrible sunburn.

But however odd his behaviour, the Slytherin had quickly figured out why Ron was acting this way.

He fancied her.

Unfortunately for him, she didn't fancy him back. In fact, he was making her exceedingly uncomfortable, more so than she can ever recall feeling before.

Yet, not even this was enough to keep Holly down, particularly when considering that she had lived with the Dursleys for eleven years. She was simply too happy to feel bad about Ron's behaviour, especially after she finally had the chance to write all of her other friends, loosely explaining about the house-elf blocking her mail. So far, everyone had written back, Remus being extremely curious about Dobby and Blaise actually inviting her over to stay. Apparently, he had been trying to do so since about a week into break.

Dear Holly,

I hope you are well. I wouldn't know seeing as how you haven't written me all summer!! A BLOODY HOUSE-ELF! A house-elf was blocking your mail? Why, by Salazar, would he do that? You don't think it is some form of plot, do you? Revenge for what happened at the end of term?

I hope not. Maybe it's just a prank or something, but who would do such a thing?

By the Maker, Holly, I've been worried about you. I thought that you were angry at me or that something had happened. I've been mailing

all our friends, and none of them had heard from you either! Fred and George wrote that they were going to your house to check on you. Don't ask me how they know where you live; I honestly don't know. I was going to go, too, but it would have taken time to meet up with them, time we didn't know we had.

Merlin, Holly, I thought that maybe You-Know-Who had gotten to you. Or maybe that your relatives had... well, you know.

I've just been... I was just really worried.

Holly paused in her reading for a moment, bursting with guilt. Deep down, she had known it wasn't her fault, but she had worried Blaise, her best friend, her first friend. He had thought that she was in danger or being mistreated by the Dursleys or possibly something worse, and it was making her feel incredibly horrible. She still wasn't used to people caring for her, so she didn't really know how to handle worry. Anger, she could manage. Fear, she could manage. Hate, she could definitely manage that.

But worry? Care? No, she didn't have a clue about those.

She simply sat in reverie for a moment, finally fighting down the guilt. Holly quickly read through the next three pages of the letter, which mostly consisted of Blaise filling her in on what had gone on with their Slytherin friends this summer.

Finally, she reached the final page.

...Well, that is about all that has happened. I must say that Draco is trying very hard to make amends. He wrote Autumn a ten page letter – well, thesis really – apologising for his past behaviour. He has also been writing to you constantly, not that you would know as you probably didn't get any of the letters. He actually visited me earlier this summer about two weeks into break, and he is going to stay with me the last day before we go back to Hogwarts.

And this brings me to my next point. I was wondering if you would like to stay with me also, but for more than a day or even a few days. I know that you're with the Weasleys right now, so I understand if you

can't come. However, I would still really like to see you, Holly. I need to see for myself that you are fine.

Owl me your decision. I really hope that you can visit me. And please, stay safe.

Your
Blaise

Friend

Eventually, after talking it over with the Weasleys and assuring them that she wasn't trying to be rude or infringe on their family, not that they actually thought either for a second, it was agreed that she would go to stay with Blaise on the following Thursday. That meant she would spend just over two weeks with him before returning to school.

As it would end up, a few days before Holly was slated to travel they received their Hogwarts letters.

Miss
Ginerva's
The
Ottery St. Catchpole

Holly

*Potter
Bedroom
Burrow*

SECOND-YEAR	STUDENTS	WILL	REQUIRE:
<u>The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2</u>	by	Miranda Goshawk	
<u>Break with a Banshee</u>	by	Gilderoy Lockhart	
<u>Gadding with Ghouls</u>	by	Gilderoy Lockhart	
<u>Holidays with Hags</u>	by	Gilderoy Lockhart	
<u>Travels with Trolls</u>	by	Gilderoy Lockhart	
<u>Voyages with Vampires</u>	by	Gilderoy Lockhart	
<u>Wanderings with Werewolves</u>	by	Gilderoy Lockhart	
<u>Year with a Yeti</u>	by	Gilderoy Lockhart	

Holly shook her head after reading this, not sure if she should be suspicious or disgusted. She had flicked through one of Mrs. Weasley's book written by Lockhart, and it had immediately given her shivers. Something about the picture of the author, emblazoned on the cover, sent chills up her spine. Additionally, Holly was a bit put out by the fact that she already had a set of second year texts, having gotten them on her last trip to Diagon Alley, but almost none of those

were now on the reading list. Something she couldn't understand as all of them were quite informative.

Shrugging, she turned to ask Percy about this, but she never got that far as the twins started talking to her, Mrs. Weasley looking on with a frown. After a rousing discussion about Gilderoy Lockhart with George whispering that his mum secretly fancied him, Molly Weasley quickly changed the subject. She soon decreed that they would fetch their supplies the next day, so that Holly would not have to worry about getting her things while with Blaise.

They were woken early the next morning by Mrs. Weasley, who quickly shoved a half-dozen bacon sandwiches at each of them. Holly only managed to eat one of hers before she was forced to admit defeat, and she swiftly added the remainder to Ron's ever shrinking pile, making the boy blush fiercely when she glanced at him.

Afterwards, Molly hurried them into their cloaks. The Slytherin wore one from last year, the one she had received for Christmas, which still fit rather well since she had barely grown at all and was supposed to be dirt resistant.

After removing a flowerpot from the kitchen mantelpiece and commenting on how they were running low, Mrs. Weasley indicated that Holly was to go first.

"Excuse me, but what exactly am I supposed to do?" Holly questioned, her eyes flickering from one Weasley to the next.

"Blimey," George put in. "I forgot that you'd never travelled by Floo before. Sorry, mate." He seemed quite chagrined.

"Yeah, sorry," Fred added, approaching his mother. "Here, Holly, just watch us." He took a pinch of glittering powder out of the flowerpot, stepped up to the fire, and threw the powder into the flames.

They immediately turned emerald green and rose higher.

Fred stepped right into it and shouted, "Diagon Alley!" And he vanished.

Holly's eyes widened in shock, causing George to pat her shoulder gently.

"Don't worry. It doesn't hurt or anything... well, not unless you don't tuck your elbows in," he added, grabbing some powder. "Oh, and I'd take your glasses off, too. Just in case."

"In case of what?" Holly asked, but George was already gone.

The rest of the Weasleys quickly added other bits of "helpful" advice as Holly removed her glasses, placing them in an inner pocket of her cloak. She nervously took her own pinch of powder and walked to the edge of the fire. The Slytherin took a deep breath, scattered the powder into the flames, and stepped forward, tucking her elbows in tightly.

The fire felt like a warm breeze.

But just as Holly was about to say her destination, she heard a stray from Ron. This thought, which was about how incredibly pretty she looked at that moment, caused her to immediately start coughing.

"D-Dia-gon Alley," she wheezed.

It felt as if she was being sucked down a giant drain. She seemed to be spinning very fast, the roaring in her ears completely deafening. She kept her eyes firmly shut, knowing that if she opened them, she would very quickly become dizzy. The Slytherin successfully fought the urge to fidget, relying heavily on her self control, and brought her elbows even closer to her body. Just as it felt the journey was going to last forever, the spinning suddenly stopped. Holly felt herself fall forward, but she snapped her eyes open. And with a speed that should have been impossible, she shot out her hands and steadied herself on the walls of a fireplace.

Taking several deep breaths, she gently removed her hands and replaced her glasses on her face. She took a tentative step forward, sighing as she realised that she didn't see Fred or George anywhere. Holly did, however, breathe easier as she realised it could be worse.

'I could have fallen onto the floor and knocked myself out,' she thought, 'but thankfully, I didn't. Further,' she mentally added, glancing at her still clean clothing, 'I could be all dirty.'

She shuddered at the thought, knowing that her dislike of dirt was ingrained from her time at the Dursleys. She had always been the one forced to clean up after Dudley, who absolutely loved to sully things just to get back at her.

Shrugging slightly, Holly glanced around again. She was quite alone, but **where** she was, she had no idea. All she could tell was that she was standing near the stone fireplace of what looked like a dimly lit wizard's shop, but nothing in here was ever likely to be on a Hogwarts school list.

A display case nearby held a withered hand on a cushion, a blood-stained pack of cards, and a staring glass eye. Evil-looking masks stared down from the wall, an assortment of human bones lay upon the counter, and rusty, spiked instruments hung from the ceiling. Even worse, the narrow street Holly could see through the dusty shop window was definitely not Diagon Alley.

Though she was slightly curious about the shop in a very morbid sort of way, Holly knew it would be better if she left, especially considering she knew nothing about the people running the store. The Slytherin swiftly and silently made her way toward the door, stretching out her mental senses just in case, but before she'd got halfway toward it, her senses alerted her that two people were coming, one of them very familiar.

Sure enough, two people appeared on the other side of the window just as Holly recognised the person. The girl fought the relieved smile that threatened to cross her face as the shop door opened, revealing a tall and blond gentleman with startling grey eyes. He was followed by none other than Draco Malfoy.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks!

Chapter Twelve: Enter the Dragon

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Twelve: Enter the Dragon

Holly fought the relieved smile that threatened to cross her face as the shop door opened, revealing a tall and blond gentleman with startling grey eyes. He was followed by none other than Draco Malfoy.

She heaved a silent sigh of relief as she watched the pair step into the shop. Draco was saying something about racing brooms and the House Quidditch team, but the girl didn't really give a flying Sickle if they were discussing the intricacies of the Snitch and Seeker interaction. Holly just wanted him to help her.

She was about to step up to the front of the shop when she noticed the shopkeeper, Mr. Borgin, come around and engage Mr. Malfoy in a conversation about purchasing several items of somewhat questionable origin. Apparently, the Ministry was raiding homes, and Mr. Malfoy did not want to be caught with certain objects.

Not wanting to interrupt, Holly stayed where she was in a darkened corner, listening as the two men haggled over price. Silently and with surging hope, she watched as Draco began to browse among the store items, and when he was just a hairsbreadth away, she stepped out in front of him.

He jerked back in surprise.

"What... Holly?" Draco asked incredulously and quite loudly.

Thankfully, neither adult noticed.

The girl put her finger over her lips, indicating that he should remain silent, and gestured him over. "Thank the Maker, you're here, Draco. I didn't know what I was going to do."

The blond just stared at her. "It's great to see you, but what are you doing here?" he questioned.

"I got lost. Floo powder. It was my first time. Well..." she trailed off.

Suddenly, he smirked. "Don't worry. I understand entirely. I have problems with Floo powder as well. I accidentally ended up in

Pansy's parent's bedroom instead of their parlour. Dreadfully embarrassing that was," he stated with a smile, reaching forward to put his hand on her arm.

Surprisingly, she didn't even flinch.

"But," he carried on, still touching her, "what are you doing here? **Hiding in the corner?**" he emphasised the last part.

Holly thought quickly, but in the end decided to go for the truth. "You see what kind of shop this is, Draco. I didn't exactly want to broadcast my presence to the owners, especially since I'm alone," she stated. "I was about to approach your father and you, but he has... er... a business deal in progress right now."

Draco a worried look dawned on his face as he realised what exactly his father was selling, in front of the Girl-Who-Lived no less.

However, Holly quickly put in, "I won't say anything. It isn't any of my business anyway. Just get me out of here, and I will call it a fair trade," she stated slyly.

Draco nodded, and his grin widened. "Thank you, but we would have helped you anyway, you know," he put in after a moment, rubbing his thumb across her arm.

The girl belatedly noticed that he was still touching her.

"I know," she whispered.

In the background she heard the adults concluded their talk.

"Shall we?" she asked.

Draco smiled wickedly. "Yes, just follow my lead." He moved his hand from her arm and grasped her palm in his, pulling her along gently. He winked at her as he led to the front of the shop.

"Father," the boy called out, "look who I found. It's my friend from school," he stated pleasantly, coming up to his father. "This is Holly,

father. Holly Potter,” he introduced with a winning smile as the girl offered a short bow to his father.

Two sets of eyes, Mr. Borgin’s and Mr. Malfoy’s, flickered to her. An unreadable emotion crossed the blond’s face as he noticed Draco squeeze her hand.

“A pleasure, Miss Potter. I am Lucius Malfoy,” he replied, gently taking her free hand and kissing it.

Holly felt a tingle run through her, much like what had occurred when she had first touched Alé but somewhat stronger. Still, nowhere near as strong as it had been with Draco or Blaise.

Lucius didn’t seem to notice as then shook her hand, like nothing had happened. “My son speaks of you all the time. He is quite fond of you, Miss Potter”

“Hello to you as well, Mr. Malfoy,” the girl stated. “And you can call me Holly, if you so wish.”

Mr. Malfoy’s lips twitched upwards. “Very well, Holly. You may call me Lucius.”

Draco beamed from off to the side. This was going far better than expected, but it was hard to tell with his father sometimes since he was generally polite to everyone. Still, his behaviour showed that he approved of Holly a great deal.

Off to the other side, Mr. Borgin apparently had finally had enough of their talk after the last statement.

“And what exactly were you doing, Miss Potter?” the shopkeeper interrupted abruptly, his eyes twitching. Obviously, he was trying to figure out how he had gotten in the shop without him noticing.

Putting on her best Slytherin face, Holly responded, “Shopping, but as no one came to my assistance, I feel my money would be best spent elsewhere.” She offered a short nod to Mr. Borgin, who was currently looking as if his Kneazle had been hit by the Knight Bus, before she turned and moved outside.

Mr. Malfoy followed in her wake, his eyes flashing with amusement.

“Did you find anything of interest, Holly?” Lucius asked smoothly once they were outside.

“A few things... but I wasn’t shopping, actually,” she allowed, gazing at him.

One of his eyebrows rose in interest.

“Truthfully, I was lost in the Floo network and came out in his shop by mistake,” she explained, noticing Draco snigger.

Lucius’ lips curled faintly. “Really?” His eyes flickered to his son, and a wicked gleam appeared. “I seem to recall a similar occurrence when Draco first started using Floo powder on his own.”

Holly looked at him with interest. “Oh, the incident at Pansy’s house?” she questioned.

“Well, there is that, but there was also the occurrence with the aunt of my wife, Narcissa,” he commented, seeing his son’s face redden. “Perhaps I will tell you of it another time. It seems as though my son is still embarrassed.”

Holly smiled. “I would love to hear about it.”

Draco blushed hotly.

The three made their way out of Knockturn Alley, Lucius nicely casting a Cleaning charm on Holly when she asked. Not that she really needed it, but she preferred to be spotless. In the background, the girl felt a familiar mental presence that reminded her of Hagrid, but she dismissed it as she was busy with something else.

Instead, Holly stretched out with her mind, attempting to get a read on Lucius. She had only felt the barest hint of his mind, much like glimpses she received from Professors Snape and Dumbledore, but she only succeeded in slamming into a mental wall, also much like what normally happened when she was around the other two men. She had only successfully read Dumbledore twice, once when he

was looking at the Mirror of Erised and then at the end of last school year. Both times she didn't get a clear reading.

She had never gotten one with the Potions master.

Holly eyed the eldest Malfoy shrewdly, but it seemed that he hadn't noticed her subtle probe. Still, she desisted in her attempts lest he would. Holly didn't think that he was a telepath like herself, but apparently, he did have some form of mental training, much like the two professors seemed to have. Lucius' block was less refined, however, and as she thought about it, Holly realised that the headmaster's was the strongest, though it slipped when he thought particularly loudly and when he was distracted. Or maybe she just seemed to be able to get around his shields. Her Head of House was just too paranoid to let his go for even a second. Even if it wasn't as strong as the headmaster's, she had only ever received ghostly feelings of thought from him.

Her mind going back to Lucius once more, Holly decided that with sufficient time and effort she might be able to override his mental shields, but she'd need practice, if she even wanted to read his thoughts at all. Thinking it over deeply, the girl decided that she would have to look into it regardless. She needed to research the various types of Mind Magic in the wizarding world just to know what she was up against. In fact, it was something that was long overdue since she only really knew about telepathy, having researched it as soon as she went to Hogwarts, but she was still learning new things all the time.

Shaking her head, Holly belatedly noticed that they had stopped in their journey through Diagon Alley and were now standing next to a willowy blonde, Draco's mother.

Holly's introduction to Narcissa Malfoy was similar to that of the lady's husband, save she did not kiss the girl's hand. Instead, Narcissa merely shook it before pulling Holly into a gentle embrace, one which was oddly pleasant, and Mrs. Malfoy was soon informed of Holly's unfortunate incident with the Floo network. She cast another Cleaning charm on the second-year, not that the girl needed this one either.

Holly also informed the Malfoys that she was supposed to be on a shopping trip with the Weasleys. All three made slight faces when

they heard this, thinking thoughts of how they felt bad for their fellow Slytherin having to be with such people. The girl further mentioned that she was staying with Blaise until the end of summer, which seemed to please them endlessly. Draco even confided that the caramel-skinned boy had invited him over the last day before break ended.

After hearing about her circumstances, Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy decided to take Holly shopping with them, saying that they could always return her to the Weasleys' care later.

Soon afterwards, their conversation took on a life of its own. Narcissa told Holly and her son several stories from her school days, including the time she had turned Filch into a bugbear for being nasty to her sister, Bellatrix, and had given him to Hagrid as a pet. The two Slytherins were almost choking with laughter as they moved through the crowded Diagon Alley, thinking about how Hagrid was with interesting animals and knowing that Filch's two day stay with the giant had to have been quite the experience.

The group of four drifted to Gringotts, where they made withdraws from their accounts without even having to ride the cart and, in Holly's case, without even having a key. She simply told them who she was, let them take a drop of blood, and the money was hers. It made a nice change from having to go at break-neck speeds through the tunnels, though the green-eyed girl did miss riding on the carts.

It was on their way to the apothecary that the group finally hit a snag in their plans. Holly felt a familiar person coming up rapidly behind them, and she only had time to turn around when Molly Weasley rushed over to them. The woman grabbed Holly forcefully by the shoulder and dragged her away, completely ignoring the girl's muffled cry of pain and Draco's protests.

It took the adult Malfoys less than a second to follow. They were about to object as well, but Holly's expression silenced them.

"Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy," the Slytherin called to them as she was dragged away. "Thank you for everything. I'll see you later, Draco."

She silently stared at his sad face, Narcissa's shocked one, and Lucius' murderous expression before she lost them in the crowd. Molly Weasley pulled her forcefully through the throng of people and over to a hoard of redheads with a token bushy-haired brown one thrown in for good measure. Holly idly wondered why Neville wasn't with them.

"Holly," Mr. Weasley panted as he ran up to her, the others following in his wake. "We hoped you'd only gone one grate too far." He mopped his glistening bald patch. "I'm so glad that Molly found you."

Holly fought the urge to grimace. "Er... me, too."

"Where did you come out?" Ginny asked suddenly.

"Knockturn Alley," Molly Weasley all but growled.

"Excellent!" said Fred and George together.

"We've never been allowed in," Ginny added enviously.

"I should hope not!" Mrs. Weasley all but shouted. "I'm just glad I found you before the Malfoys could do anything... **unsavoury**."

"Malfoys? What are you talking about, dear," Arthur Weasley cut in.

His eyes widened as his wife quickly filled him in. She was about to say to make what was probably a very unflattering comment about when Holly interrupted.

"Oh, but they were very nice to me, Mrs. Weasley. They brought me to Diagon Alley and to Gringotts, and they were going to help me find you," she semi-lied without even blinking.

Molly Weasley instantly deflated. "Oh... well, I'm sure that they had less than honest intentions at any rate. Come along then, dear."

The group moved along to Gringotts so that the others could get their money. Along the way, Mr. Weasley interrogated Holly about Lucius' doings in Knockturn Alley. However, she deftly dodged his questions,

saying that she ran into him in the Alley proper and had no idea what he was doing there.

After they had collected their money, actually using the carts, they separated into various groups with instructions to meet at Flourish and Blotts in an hour. Fred and George spotted their friend, Lee Jordan, and immediately headed off with him, Mrs. Weasley yelling at their retreating backs that they better not even think of going to Knockturn Alley. Molly, in turn, took Ginny by the hand and led her to a second-hand robe shop. Mr. Weasley insisted on taking the Grangers, Hermione's parents, off to the Leaky Caldron for a drink.

Holly had hoped to sneak off and find Draco once more, but Ron and Hermione killed those plans by latching on to her and dragging her to buy ink and parchment. Next, she was taken to the apothecary, where they all stacked up on ingredients, the lone Slytherin buying extra. Briefly, both girls thought about going to Madam Malkin's, but in the end, they went to Gambol and Japes Wizarding Joke Shop. There, the three met up with the twins and Lee Jordan and bought a few pranking items before going into the junk shop next door, where they found Percy.

As their time came to an end, they headed for Flourish and Blotts, and Holly was relieved that she might finally be able to get away from Ron. For the last hour, he had been thinking of her non-stop, and it was getting to be quite annoying. However, as they moved to the bookstore they noticed that they were by no means the only ones making their way inside. As the trio approached, they saw to their surprise a large crowd jostling outside the doors, trying to get in.

The reason for this was proclaimed by a large banner stretched across the upper windows:

GILDEROY Will be signing copies of his *LOCKHART*
MAGICAL autobiography
ME
Today 12:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Hermione was excited that she might actually get to meet him. Beside her, Ron gagged, and Holly could only shiver as she remembered the

revolting feeling she got whenever she saw the man's picture. She didn't even want to imagine what he would be like in person.

Nipping into the shop, they managed to each grab copies of Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2. Holly helped herself to several other texts as she already had a copy from her previous trip to the store. Although before she could truly start to browse, both Gryffindors bodily dragged her forward to the gathered Weasleys, and Ron's hand lingered on her person before she deftly sidestepped.

Seeing the sheer number of books the Slytherin had accumulated and noting that she didn't have a store basket, Ginny gamely agreed to share her cauldron, which she was using to hold her other school supplies. Holly gratefully dumped her books inside.

Looking back on it, Holly could still not be entirely certain what happened next. All she knew was that Lockhart came out, revolting her far more in person as his mind was incredibly slimy feeling, and then, a photographer for the *Dailey Prophet* started snapping his picture repeatedly.

After that, things became even sketchier, but apparently, the photographer stepped on Ron's foot. The redhead complained, while Lockhart heard him and looked up, spotting Holly. The man then leapt forward and attempted to grab her, but he wasn't successful as the girl's time from the Dursleys had taught her to dodge quite well. The resulting photos of the incident were proof enough since they only showed her on the edge, jumping out of the way. Afterwards, an unperturbed Lockhart realised that she wasn't going to come forward, so he settled for announcing that he was the new Defence teacher at Hogwarts.

Holly felt like she might cry after hearing that. There was no way she could stand being with him for five minutes, much less an hour every other day for an entire school year. Perhaps she could switch schools. Or better yet option out of the class.

Soon after, the Slytherin found herself presented with the entire set of the demented man's works, which she gamely donated to Ginny Weasley.

"You can have these," Holly murmured to her, tipping the books into the other girl's cauldron. "I'll buy my own..." her voice trailed off as she recognised a familiar mind nearby. Holly whirled around, smile on her face.

"Draco!"

"That's correct," the blond announced, sliding up to her. "I saw what happened earlier, and I must say that was a very nice dodge, Quidditch worthy even. I hope you use it on the pitch this year."

Holly flushed faintly. "Yes, well, I wasn't about to let him touch me," she pronounced firmly, belatedly realising that Ginny was watching their exchange. "Oh, sorry. This is Ginny Weasley, Draco. Ginny, this is Draco Malfoy."

The redhead's eyes flickered to the blond, but surprisingly, they didn't narrow.

Meanwhile, Draco took a tentative step toward her. "Hello," he attempted, the urge to be rude to a Weasley battling with the need to be friendly and remain in Holly's good graces.

Ginny, however, made no attempt to speak. She simply stepped back and moved behind the older girl.

Draco frowned.

The situation was quickly becoming awkward, and the unexpected arrival of Ron and Hermione didn't help matters.

"Malfoy," Ron spat angrily, moving over to block Holly from him. "What're you doing here?" he demanded, looking at Draco as if he were something unpleasant on the sole of his shoe.

The blond sighed. "I was simply talking to Holly. That's not a crime." At Ron's enraged face, he exhaled. "Look, I'm sorry about everything, about last year and how I treated both you and Neville. I'm sorry to you as well, Miss Granger," he added turning to the Muggleborn girl.

Hermione nodded somewhat shakily in return, her eyes very wide.

Facing the other boy once more, Draco carried on, "I apologise for my actions."

Holly smiled and stepped toward him, but Ron's hand on her wrist halted her.

"Well, I don't accept," he spit back, glaring at the blond.

Beside him, the girl felt a brief flash of jealousy, and her mind jumped to an instant conclusion as she noticed the way Ron's eyes flickered between Draco and herself. The redhead was jealous; he was rather taken with her and thought that Draco was as well. He believed that Draco was apologising to impress her.

Holly froze as she tried to figure out what to do next, watching as Ron's face continued to redden, and he stepped toward the other Slytherin. He was about to say something else, something much worse and undoubtedly foul, but the appearance of Arthur Weasley halted him.

"Ron!" Mr. Weasley said loudly, struggling over with Fred and George. "What're you doing? It's too crowded in here; let's go outside."

"Well, well, well – Arthur Weasley," Lucius Malfoy stated suddenly, coming up behind Draco and placing his hands on his son's shoulders.

"Lucius," Mr. Weasley commented, nodding coldly.

The two men stood sneering at each other, though the redhead's seemed to fall flat.

Things just deteriorated from there. Lucius commented on the Ministry raids. Mr. Weasley took offence and then threw himself at the blond. The two were now fighting, dozens of heavy spell books thundering down on all their heads.

There was a yell of "Get him, Dad!" from Fred or George or maybe even Ron.

Mrs. Weasley was shrieking, "No, Arthur, no!"

Due to the fact that all of their eyes were fixed on the fight between Lucius and Mr. Weasley and that Holly was busy attempting to keep Ron from jumping Draco, they all failed to notice the shadowy figure that came up behind Ginny. They also all neglected to note the person discreetly drop a book into the girl's cauldron before melting away into the store.

Ginny never even noticed the extra weight as it dropped in; she was too focused on her family.

The fight was broken up within minutes. The store manager and Hagrid, who had magically appeared, bodily hauled Mr. Weasley away from Lucius. The manager also all but booted them out of the store, claiming that they should know better. Holly discreetly waved to Draco, who smiled weakly, as George tugged her along after his mother.

Their trip to Diagon was pretty much a bust after that, and everyone knew it. Soon enough, they were all back at the Burrow. The Slytherin hurried up to Ginny's room as soon as they arrived, shutting herself inside. She didn't come out until much later, refusing repeated attempts from Ron to get her out, when Fred and George dragged to their room for an impromptu game of Exploding Snap. It was an action that would change Holly's very life, not that she would realise it until much later.

While she was with the twins, Ginny came upstairs, carrying her still book-filled cauldron with her. In her room, she began to sort through the things, separating her stuff from Holly's. Deciding to be nice and hoping that the Slytherin would appreciate the gesture, Ginny opened the older girl's trunk. The redhead fought the urge to look through Holly's things as she pulled her purchases out of the cauldron, separating Holly's potions supplies, her parchment, ink, quills, and the books she had bought at Flourish and Blotts.

Finally, there were only a few things left inside the cauldron. Among them was a title-less, medium-sized book. Examining it slowly, Ginny came to the conclusion that it must be a diary, and as it wasn't hers, Holly must have bought it and planned to keep a journal. But what the

redhead failed to register were the engraved letters at the bottom of the cover: *T. M. Riddle*.

What Ginny also failed to notice was the tiny, yellow amulet that slipped loose of the diary and fell onto her stack of robes with a soft thump.

Shrugging, Ginny packed the diary neatly in the remaining open space, tucking it gently along the side in the place between the robes and the inside of the trunk. She surveyed her work with a smile and shut the lid. She hurried off to Fred and George's room to tell the older girl of the nice thing she had done for her, packing her things like that. Hopefully, it would make the Girl-Who-Lived think well of her.

The next morning, Dante and Blaise Zabini came bright and early for Holly. Ginny wasn't even awake when she dressed or when Arthur Weasley levitated her trunk downstairs. The caramel-skinned boy greeted her with a hug, while his father took her things to the awaiting Knight Bus. Holly was forced into a crushing embrace by Mrs. Weasley and received a few pats on the back from the woman's husband before she could escape. A remarkably short but still nauseating ride later, the purple bus left three semi-queasy people standing in front of nothing short of a mansion.

It was at least three storeys high, stretching across Holly's view and having two separate wings, and it was composed of what seemed to be enchanted, greyish-silver stone. She simply gaped at it for a moment, a bemused Blaise by her side, before she was gently taken along the path and inside.

As soon as she walked in the door, she was all but tackled by two small blurs, Blaise's sisters, who were excited to finally meet her. Isabella, the eldest at the lofty age of seven, was almost the splitting image of Blaise with longer hair. She possessed the same rich skin colour, brownish-black hair, and deep-brown eyes, not to mention the same facial structure and a very familiar smile. On the other hand, Alexandria, age five, was obviously related to them, but her looks were different. She, too, had the same skin and facial features, but that was where the similarities ended. Her hair was surprisingly white-

blonde, a colour very similar to that of Draco and Lucius Malfoy. Additionally, Holly noticed that the girl had light-green eyes, ones that were much the colour of spring leaves.

Smiling, Holly glanced over the two girls' shoulders to see their mother, Erendiria, approaching. The beautiful dark-skinned and rather tall woman grinned at her, Holly noting that Blaise and his sisters most definitely had her looks, as well as her smile.

"It is so good to see you again, dear," the lady greeted, hugging Holly as well, though much more sedately. "I'm so glad that you agreed to visit."

"Thank you for having me, Mrs. Zabini," Holly stated, feeling strangely shy.

The lady laughed. "You are welcome, and just call me Eren." She beamed down as her two daughters politely looked on, even though it was readily apparent that they desired to drag Holly off with them, most likely to have a tea party or something similar.

Unfortunately for them, Erendiria insisted on first sitting down to breakfast, where Holly happily engaged in conversation with the family. Afterwards, she was shown her room, but the Slytherin didn't really have a chance to examine the blue and green themed space before she was hurried off to the library with Blaise. They spent the rest of the day there, his two sisters coming to join them and showing Holly various magical children's books, which she greatly enjoyed.

It wasn't until after dinner that Holly discovered the diary, tucked away within her trunk. She and Blaise were in the guestroom she was to stay in, one that was directly across the hall from his room, sorting through the things she had bought at Diagon Alley. Somehow, they had gotten into a conversation about the Weasley family, more specifically Ginny, and their reaction to Holly's celebrity.

"Yes, Ginny is very nice, but she's a bit hung-up on the whole Girl-Who-Lived rubbish," Holly stated with exasperation, looking through her trunk. "She kept staring at me the entire time I was there, and it wasn't as though I could escape her. We were sharing her room."

Blaise chuckled. "Well, it could have been worse."

Holly paused and shivered. "True. Imagine how bad it would have been if I were a boy. She probably would have fancied me something dreadful."

"Yes, I guess you're lucky in that she fancies blokes and not other girls," he allowed with a laugh. "She probably would have done crazy things like forget what she was doing whenever you were around--"

"Or put her elbow in the butter dish every time I looked at her," Holly put in. At Blaise's questioning glance, she explained, "Oh, Ron did that."

His face blossomed into a full-blown grin. "Sounds like a different Weasley 'fancies you something dreadful', my friend."

The girl glared at him. "Don't remind me."

She turned and began looking through her trunk once more. Her hands were searching along the edges, hoping to find her copy of Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2, when they closed around another book entirely.

"What's this?" Holly pulled the diary free and examined the cover, noting the inscription. "*T. M. Riddle*." She ran her fingers over the letters a strange feeling stirring in both her mind and belly.

"What have you got there, Holly?" Blaise questioned coming up behind her and placing his hands on her shoulders.

She twisted around to face him. "It looks like a diary, and it's certainly not mine or Ginny's. Look at the initials. See."

She fingered the cover once more. Inside her head, she had the same feeling she did when another mind was around, and there were flares of this feeling every time she stroked the book.

He nodded. "But how did it get in your trunk?"

"I don't know. I certainly didn't put it there," she stated, the faint stirring in her mind still present.

There was something about the name that was so very familiar. Like the name of a childhood friend she hadn't talked to in a long time, but that was silly. Holly never had any friends before Blaise. Well, perhaps Hedwig and Hagrid.

"Ginny or Mrs. Weasley maybe," he supplied, also running his fingers over the book. "But why would they give you another person's diary, especially an unused one," he added as they opened it and noted that all of the pages were blank.

Holly shrugged, shutting the cover and running her thumb over the letters once more. "I have no idea."

The days went by swiftly at Blaise's house. The two of them started researching Mind Magic, the boy gamely agreeing to help her after she mentioned Lucius' mental shielding. When Holly asked if his parents would be suspicious about his unusual interest, he answered in the negative.

"Oh, they won't think a thing about it really. They'll just believe it is my new obsession. Like Animagi when I was eight or ensouled objects when I was ten," he stated truthfully.

While their research was mostly limited to the Zabini family library with occasional forays into Dante's personal one, they did make some progress, learning more about the history of telepathy, empathy, and something called Legilimency.

As time passed in the Zabini home, Holly was quickly forced to admit that she actually liked being here even more than she did at the Weasleys'. It wasn't that Blaise's house was larger or that it was a good deal quieter, not having Fred and George there; it was that Holly just felt like she belonged. There just wasn't another word to describe it.

At the Weasleys', she felt as if she was a guest and that she was imposing on their generosity. Whenever she sat down to meals or

curled up in front of the fireplace or even whenever she simply went upstairs to go to bed, she just couldn't help feeling like an intruder. It was the Weasleys' house and their table and fireplace and Ginny's room; it wasn't hers. She just didn't belong. Even looking around, she could tell that. Had someone visited while she was there, it would have been readily apparent who the family members were and who was the guest. The red hair was a dead giveaway.

But here, Holly didn't feel that way at all. It wasn't that she looked a little like the Zabinis, though with her dark hair, fair skin, and glasses she did appear a great deal like Dante. The Slytherin just felt liked she belonged.

Blaise's two sisters loved to spend time with her and had already given her a nickname, *hermana*, though Holly had no idea what it meant and was hesitant about asking. The duo brought her to their tea parties, ones where she sat happily among the various stuffed but still interactive animals. And the little girls begged her constantly to read to them or to play with them in the garden.

Additionally, Dante often invited Holly to browse through the family library with Blaise or to sit and play chess with him after dinner. Blaise's mother, on the other hand, was a bit more active in making Holly feel like a member of the family. Erendiria, who upon hearing that Holly didn't know a great deal about the social workings of the wizarding world, had decided that she needed to be tutored. Currently, the lady was teaching her two daughters plus Holly how to ballroom dance amidst many giggles, assuring them that they would one day need this particular skill. Further, the excited matriarch was completely filling in the rest of the gaps in Holly's social education; she seemed thrilled to have someone to tutor in these areas as Blaise knew most of it already and her daughters were still too young to completely understand.

Holly just took it all in stride, though, learning which fork to use at when during fancy dinners and how to properly greet the Minister. Truthfully, she was actually enjoying the lessons... and the attention.

Blaise simply shook his head at all of it, stating that it was an Old Family practice, allowing himself to be the dance partner. Of course,

that was after promising his mother to continue Holly's lessons when they returned to school.

Yet, even the lessons only seemed to make Holly feel even closer to the Zabini family because never before had an adult cared about if she would make a fool of herself in public. It was nice to be treated like this, as though she were a family member with an adult who cared about her.

Holly eventually broached this subject with Blaise one day.

"Well, it is very understandable. That's just the way my family works," he responded.

She gave him a somewhat sceptical look.

Blaise clarified, "Well, you see, Holly, our father isn't really our father. Dante is our step-father; he was originally Dante Castilla. My Mum married him when Alexandria was two."

"Oh," Holly began, but her friend cut her off.

"And well, Lexie and Belle aren't my full sisters; they're actually my half-sisters. We have different fathers," he confessed, looking at her strangely.

Holly seemed to be very confused, but she interrupted before her friend could clarify further.

"You don't have to explain--"

"No," he said quickly, "I want to... it's just hard. You see, my mum has been married multiple times; she has really bad luck with husbands," he added with a hint of irony. "Everyone thinks she is some kind of Black Widow, but she isn't," he hastily assured her. "Her first husband was killed in a Transfiguration accident at one of the magical universities; we're still not sure what happened there. Her second died of Dragon Pox, and her third husband was my birth father, Horatio. He... he was murdered before I was even born." Blaise's voice was strangely neutral, as if he weren't relating something so very personal and painful.

Holly took his hand in his, squeezing tightly.

“No one knows exactly for certain who did it, but we think it was Death Eaters.” He added with a very bizarre look on his face, “Well, more like someone affiliated with them.” The boy hesitated for a second, taking a deep breath before forcing himself along.

“That’s why we fled the country during the uprising. While we were in Italy, she met my first stepfather, Matthias. He was an Auror though, killed during a raid. After that, we moved back to England; mum married my sisters’ father about a year later, but he died when Lexie was still a baby. Eventually, mum met Dante.” Blaise again paused, but a smile was tugging at his lips. “And even though she had all but given up on men... well, it was love at first sight, and that was it,” he concluded with finality.

“Blaise--”

He shook his head. “No, please let me say this. The entire point is, Holly, that you feel like you belong because **you do belong**. Dante is my father, even if we’re not related by blood, and I feel as if you’re family, too. Mum and Papa are starting to feel the same way as well, and my sisters have already adopted you,” Blaise stated emphatically, mood brightening. “They’ve always wanted someone who would willingly play dress up with them.”

Holly couldn’t think of anything to say to that, so she simply smiled.

Hermana: Sister

AN: Mwahah! (Author gives an evil laugh.)

That one threw you for a loop, no? Holly now has the diary of Tom Riddle, and Ginny has some strange amulet.

I wonder what is going to happen. Wait... I already know what’s going to happen.

Stay tuned to find out more.

Also, if you are curious about what Blaise looks like: caramel/coffee-coloured skin, dark-brown eyes, black/brown hair, an oval shaped face, and Mediterranean features.

Oh, and to everyone who reviewed: Thanks!

Chapter Thirteen: Dante's Special Delivery

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Thirteen: Dante's Special Delivery

The days flew by after the discussion about Blaise's family, and they were filled with tea parties, books, curiosity about the strange diary, research into Ming Magic, lessons, chess, more books, more research, more lessons. The Slytherin pair made some progress in their researching into Mind Magic, discovering that alcohol could temporarily suppress or mute the abilities. However, they made little way with the mysterious diary, though the boy swore there was something odd with it, and Holly's telepathy, which kept picking up a pseudo-presence, seemed to indicate the same. Time passed quickly, and finally, it was the eve of their return to Hogwarts.

It was the day Draco was to arrive.

The blond in question arrived with great aplomb through the Floo Network, which is to say that he came flying out, followed by his trunk, and landed in a heap. Blaise jovially extricated Draco from the tangle of limbs and gave him a helping hand up. Eren Zabini and Holly stood off to the side, watching the spectacle, the former casting a discreet Cleaning charm and the latter moving instantly to their side.

Yet, before she could even greet him, the blond was already at her side, wrapping his arms around her in a fierce hug. Automatically, her arms came up, and she squeezed him back.

"Holly," he breathed in her ear before pulling back. His face was still very close to hers.

"Hello, Draco," she responded with a smile, still somewhat surprised by the display of affection. She supposed that he was trying to make up for lost time, but even with this idea in her head, she couldn't help but blush. Blaise was usually the only one to hug her, though his family was starting to do so also.

Blaise and his mother watched their interaction with interest, but as soon as the boy saw Holly's face flush, he stepped in.

"Well, Draco, I feel a bit put out," he teased, attracting the blond's attention. "Where's my hug?" He fluttered his lovely eye-lashes mockingly.

The other boy snorted. "As if I would, Zabini," Draco replied before deliberately sidestepping and going to greet Mrs. Zabini.

Holly laughed, just as the caramel-skinned boy intended, her embarrassment forgotten.

Soon, the rest of the Zabini family, Dante and the two daughters, came into the kitchen to have breakfast, also exchanging pleasantries. Shortly thereafter, the house-elves served a scrumptious meal, which passed quickly with all the conversation.

Afterwards, Blaise led his two friends upstairs, stowing Draco's things in the room next to his. There, with great style and a bit of flourish, the blond presented Holly a late birthday gift. It turned out to be a full servicing and detailing kit for her wand. The box was complete with several specialised and magical polishes, two ritual knives to carve runes of power, and a wrist-holster that was spelled to automatically fit and to prevent a wand from being summoned. All told, it was an incredibly expensive gift, and her eyes bugged out at the thought of how much it cost. The holster alone, made of high quality dragonhide and with countless extra magics added to it, was worth at the very least ten Galleons. More than her wand had cost, now that she thought about it.

Blushing with pleasure at the present, Holly was about to question her blond friend about the need for such a thing, but then, the memory of how easily she was disarmed by Quirrell the previous spring caused her to firmly shut her mouth. Instead, the girl settled for a happy and gracious thank you, giving Draco another embrace. Blaise smiled at the scene, quite pleased by the change in the other two's relationship and the fact that Holly actually initiated physical contact.

Next, the trio travelled across the hallway to Blaise's room, where they spent a lazy morning chatting about various topics and eating the Chocolate Frogs Draco had brought with him. They talked about their respective summers, Draco describing his trip to France with his parents at the start of the holiday, visiting distant relatives. Blaise mentioned that he had basically read all summer and then had spent time with Holly. The girl, in turn, simply focused on her time with the

Weasleys and vaguely alluded to the Zabinis. She completely left out any mention of the Dursleys since both of her companions already knew about everything she was willing to say on that particular subject.

She and the Blaise quickly told Draco about their various studies, not mentioning the Mind Magic since she didn't want to tell anyone else just yet. However, they did inform him about the diary, and Holly even went to her room to fetch it.

"Hm... *T. M. Riddle*," Draco stated, reading the script on the cover. He turned his head to glance at Holly, who was sitting on Blaise's bed. "You said you found it in your trunk?" he asked, handing the diary back.

She nodded. "Yes, but I have no idea how it got there. The nearest we can figure is that it was placed there by mistake, but the only people who could have put it there are the Weasleys. Why would they even have it?"

"I don't know. Are you going to ask?" the blond questioned, leaning back against Blaise's bed from his position on the floor.

"Maybe. I'm not sure. It's just that there is something so very familiar about the name." Green eyes closed as she concentrated. "I just can't remember from where. I don't want to ask because then they might want it back, and I want to know." She fingered the cover of the diary. "I have to know." Holly lapsed into silence, simply running her fingers across the surface.

The two boys exchanged a look.

"And it's completely blank; nothing written in it at all?" Draco rubbed his chin thoughtfully before reaching for a Chocolate Frog from the box next to him.

Blaise answered this time. "No, my revealer didn't show anything either. We were going to try a few spells on it when we return to school," he replied, also reaching for a Frog from his place on the foot of the bed.

The blond nodded and absentmindedly looked at his card, which turned out to be the rare Dominic Dorée and led them to launch into a discussion about their various collections. Yet, even through all the chatter the diary remained in Holly's hands, and her eyes constantly sought the name on the cover.

T. M. Riddle.

Deep in her heart she knew that name, and she was going to do everything in her power to find out why.

The following morning dawned bright and clear. The Slytherins woke early, making sure that they would have more than enough time to have breakfast and then reach the station. Forty-five minutes before the train was to leave, all of their trunks were nicely shrunk and tucked into Dante's pocket. Everyone, the two little girls and Erendiria included, gathered around the fireplace, preparing to use the Floo network. Throwing in a pinch of the green powder, Holly followed Blaise to their destination, a wizarding shop conveniently located near King's Cross. She stumbled as she came out but managed to keep her feet, no doubt thanks to the pointers Dante had given her earlier and to the fact that Blaise swooped forward to steady her. Soon, she was joined by Draco and the rest of the Zabini's, and the group made their way to the station.

They made it to the barrier with ten minutes to spare, and Erendiria entered first with her daughters, her husband trailing behind. The three students hung back for a moment as Blaise had to tie his shoe, which had strangely come undone, even though it was spelled not to. Shaking his head, the caramel-skinned boy picked up his cat basket and joined his friends by the barrier. The three casually leaned against it, but strangely, they never slid through.

Instead, they remained exactly where they were: standing by the outside.

Looking over to her friends, Holly commented in an undertone, "We're at the correct place, aren't we?"

The blond glanced over at the various platform signs. "Yes, between nine and ten."

He subtly indicated the signs, careful not to attract Muggle attention. Thankfully, Dante still had their trunks and their bird cages, both Holly's and Draco's owls having flown on to Hogwarts. Blaise's cat, Mr. Momo, was in a carrier by his feet, but he didn't draw any real notice as the carrier wasn't an unusual sight like an owl would be.

Blaise added in, "Well, what's going on? It is almost like the barrier is closed. We didn't miss the train, did we?"

The only girl shook her head and smiled faintly at a Muggle business man, who was eyeing them peculiarly.

"No, but we will, if we cannot get through," she murmured quietly as the two boys moved closer to her on either side. "The barrier wouldn't close immediately afterwards anyway. The people who don't Apparate have to leave somehow."

The brunet glanced at his watch. "We have two minutes left. If we don't make it, my parents will have to come back through because they brought my sisters. I say, we wait for them here." He turned to his two friends, silently asking for their opinions.

"Yes, people have missed the train before undoubtedly, and they still made it to school," Draco put in, leaning more fully against the barrier, but he stubbornly still remained on the outside.

Holly inched forward and looked at Blaise's watch, noticing the final moment tick by.

Three seconds... two... one...

"Well, we have certainly missed the train now." Her eyes flicked around, and she indicated a spot a little ways away. "We should wait for them over there, so we won't be in the way." She walked over to the end of the wall, the two boys following in her wake.

“Oh, now, it works!” Draco huffed sarcastically several moments later as they watched several adults slip out of the barrier and head towards the exit. “Typical.” He snorted and prissed his hair.

The other two Slytherins secretly exchange a smile. Nonetheless, their attention was soon pulled back to the barrier, and Blaise craned his head to look around a group of Japanese tourists.

“...I am still worried though, love,” a voice that sounded exactly like Erendiria Zabini stated hurriedly by the barrier. “You still have their trunks, and we never actually saw them get on the train. Are you sure that they did?”

“They must have,” another voice, this one sounding like Dante, responded. “We did search the platform, and they obviously weren’t there. I told Blaise that if we got separated just to board the train anyway, and we’d send their things later. I will do just that when we get home; the owl will probably reach Hogwarts before they do.”

The three students exchanged a look before heading directly over to Blaise’s parents. “Mum, Papa,” the boy called, coming up to the couple and his two sisters, who beamed as soon as they saw him.

Eren’s dark eyes instantly travelled to her son and his friends. “Blaise... Holly, Draco,” she breathed with relief, “there you are. You missed the train.”

“We know, Mum. The barrier malfunctioned; it wouldn’t let us in,” he replied.

Dante and Erendiria shared a glance.

“Well, no worries,” the man stated, considering the problem. “I can Floo them to Hogsmeade, owl the school, and take them on up,” he said to his wife, who seemed to be thinking it over as well.

After a moment, Eren responded, “Yes, I’ll take the girls home.” She squeezed her two daughters’ hands. “Does that sound fine, children?”

The three Slytherins nodded and followed the Zabinis back to the wizarding shop. Eren and the two youngest went first, returning to the

manor, while Dante and the students travelled to Hogsmeade. Once more, Holly came stumbling out of the Floo, again managing to keep her feet as Draco reached out to steady her, and nearly running straight into an attractive, middle-aged witch. She quickly apologised to Madam Rosmerta, but the woman shrugged it off, only to freeze as she noticed Holly's scar.

Another annoying, at least in the girl's opinion, exchange later, and the group was heading towards the Post Office. They quickly sent a message to the castle, basically explaining that the three students had missed the train and that they were currently in the village with Dante Zabini.

They stayed in Hogsmeade after owling the headmaster as Madam Rosmerta had told them that he would send a carriage to pick up the children but that it probably wouldn't arrive until well after lunchtime. Not having anything else to do until it appeared, Dante showed the three around the village, which they would all get to visit next year anyway. He led them first to Honeydukes, where they stocked up on the various magical sweets, before taking the trio to Zonko's, actually allowing them to buy pranking supplies since Blaise and Draco were determined to pull a good one on the Weasley twins.

Laughing as they left the shop due to the fact that Draco now had black and pink hair, Dante led them up the path to the Shrieking Shack. Strangely, it hadn't been built until his fourth year but still managed to be the most haunted building in Britain.

By then it was time for lunch, so Dante finally fixed Draco's hair before leading the three students back to the Three Broomsticks for an incredible meal that came complete with the wonderful drink butterbeer. Afterwards, Blaise's father finally acquiesced and took them to the book shop. Two hours and several new books later, Dante Zabini dragged them out of the store and to the carriage that had finally arrived.

Holly eyed the supposedly horseless carriage warily, picking up strange sensations. Blaise, noticing her odd reaction, grasped her by the elbow and led her forward and inside. He quietly sat on one side,

pulling her down beside him. On the other, Draco entered, Dante coming in last. The door magically shut behind them.

Seeing that his friend was still bothered, the brunet turned to his father. "Papa, how do the carriages work? I mean, are they spelled so that they move?"

"Er... I don't believe so," the scholarly man replied. "Actually, I think that the Hogwarts' carriages are supposed to be pulled by Threstrals. A type of magical horse that is invisible unless you have witnessed the impact of death," he explained after a moment.

"Witnessed the impact of death?" Draco repeated uneasily as he sat down.

Dante's eyes flickered to Holly. "Yes, you have to have seen someone die, while understanding what it meant."

The girl inhaled sharply. "So someone who witnessed death but didn't comprehend at the time wouldn't see them? Like say... a small child?" she asked, and Blaise, who was sitting next to her reached for her hand, squeezing it tightly.

Dante Zabini nodded very slowly. "Yes, my dear."

And they lapsed into silence, only the sounds of the moving carriage filling the void.

The caramel-skinned boy exchanged a subtle look with his father and squeezed Holly's hand again. He cast his mind around for another topic.

"So... why do you think the barrier failed?"

Dante smiled faintly, silently thankful his son had defused the tension. "Well, it is possible that the magic malfunctioned, closing it, but then we, wouldn't have been able to exit." He considered the problem, absentmindedly removing his glasses so that he could wipe them on his robe. "Or perhaps someone spelled it shut."

The blond questioned, "But who would do that? And, more importantly, why?"

The other three thought about it for a moment before Holly stated, "The house-elf." Her eyes travelled to her companions. "It had to have been. He didn't want me to return to school, after all. He said that there was danger at Hogwarts."

"Interesting theory," Dante allowed, putting his glasses back on and pushing them up his nose.

Blaise agreed, "It does make sense."

"Yes. What did you say his name was again?" Draco inquired as shifted in his seat.

"Dobby," Holly answered carefully, turning to glance at him.

A look of concentration crossed the blond's face. "I believe that we have a house-elf by that name. Strange creature really, but it might not be him."

At her confused look, Dante put in, "Dobby is the house-elf equivalent of John, so there are quite a number of them with that name."

"So we can't go by just his name." Holly put in after a second, "He could be attached to anyone then."

Blaise laughed mirthlessly. "True, but for all we know, he could be a free-elf even."

"Not that I'd blame anyone for freeing him, if he is even half as mad as you said, Holly," Draco commented with a snort. He casually glanced out of his window, noticing that they were near the castle. "Oh, look, we're here."

A moment later, the carriage stopped just outside of the Entrance Hall, and they headed inside, Dante bringing up the rear, only to meet the deputy headmistress by the door. McGonagall eyed the three Slytherins shrewdly, as though determining whether they had purposely missed the train or not. She was about to reprimand them

regardless, but she smiled suddenly as she noticed Blaise's father standing behind them.

"Dante Castilla. My, my... I haven't seen you in ages," she stated, seeming inordinately pleased.

Blaise's father flushed slightly at the greeting. "Hello, Professor," he answered, moving to shake her hand. "It's Zabini now."

McGonagall looked at him intently, a frown tugging at her lips. "Ah... yes, of course." She didn't sound the least bit happy about it, her eyes drifting back to the three students. "Well, come along. You can wait in the Great Hall until the others arrive."

The Slytherins glanced at Dante, who still had their things, both trunks and new purchases alike. "Oh, go ahead. I will unshrink your things and have them sent to your dorms. Goodbye, children." He shook hands with both Holly and Draco. "It was a pleasure having you stay; you will have to do so again. Perhaps over Christmas." He turned to his son, giving him a firm hug. "Be good, Blaise. I love you." He released the boy and smiled.

McGonagall, who had watched the exchange with interest, curtly nodded and motioned to the Great Hall. She led them inside and waited by the door as they sat at their House table. The trio looked around, noticing that a few of the teachers were already at the Head Table, quietly talking with one another. Professor Flitwick briefly looked up at them, smiling as he noticed Holly, and waved. However, another one of the other professors, a tiny but curvy woman with golden-brown hair, drew him back in the conversation before he could come over to greet them.

Not having much else to do, the Slytherins quickly went back to the conversation they were having in the carriage, once more going over what they knew of the house-elf. About a half-hour later, the other students started filing in, and all of them glanced at the Slytherin trio as they entered, curious as to why they were already in the Great Hall. The other second-years greeted them with enthusiasm as they arrived at the table, paying special attention to Holly.

Milli hugged the other girl fiercely, squeezing her until she was nearly blue in the face and promptly sitting on her other side, shoving Draco out of the way. Pansy was no less enthusiastic, but thankfully, she was less forceful. Theo and Gavin both hugged her as well. Though, by that time, the small Slytherin was feeling a bit overwhelmed, and Blaise shooed them off of her. The rest readily interpreted the hard glint in his eyes and settled for merely a pat on the shoulder or a squeeze of the hand.

The group along with several other members of their House quietly asked about their absence on the train. Fortunately, they had already discussed their answer and simply responded that they had missed it, not mentioning the fact that the barrier hadn't let them through. Cassandra Troy and Titania Shacklebolt stopped by, and Holly congratulated both of them when she noticed the former's Head Girl badge and the latter's Prefect one. The rest of the Quidditch team came over shortly thereafter, inquiring why she hadn't been on the train. An anxious Alé and a worried Hermione, as well as a nervous Neville and even the twins came over to ask also.

Ron was conspicuous in his absence. No one commented on it, however.

The group of second-year Slytherins and Gavin covered the awkwardness by asking Draco, Holly, and Blaise about their summers, having missed the usual exchange on the way over. Again, their friends paid particular attention to Holly's recounting, noticing that she glossed over her time at the Dursleys. They exchanged ominous glances, which Holly didn't miss, knowing that it couldn't be good.

Their discussion was interrupted by the entrance of McGonagall with the first-years, and they idly watched as the children walked by them on the way up to the front of the hall. However, one first-year in particular, a girl with a dreamy expression on her face, immediately drew Holly's attention. The girl of interest had long, blonde hair that fell to mid-back and the brightest blue eyes Holly had ever seen, beating out even Dumbledore.

The girl was dressed in the typical Hogwarts uniform, but the older student noted that she had added several accessories, such as a necklace and matching set of earrings that appeared to be miniature Chocolate Frog Cards complemented by pink and brown striped socks. She walked as if in a complete daze, automatically following the boy in front of her, stepping and stopping when he did. Her eyes flitted about the Great Hall, seeing something that was not there or maybe something that everyone else merely could not.

Holly inhaled sharply as the first-year unexpectedly met her gaze, and she gripped Blaise's arm.

"What is it?" the boy asked quietly as he noticed the staring match.

His friend finally tore her gaze away and looked at him. "I... I don't know," she murmured. "There's just something about her." Her eyes instantly travelled back to the other girl, who was now watching McGonagall bring over the Hat and stool. "Just something... something special."

Blaise nodded faintly and turned towards the other Slytherins, who had now noticed Holly's behaviour.

"Er... she's just not feeling well," he covered smoothly.

However, they didn't seem to believe him. Milli raised an incredulous eyebrow but remained silent. Theo nudged Gavin, and the two of them watched her with worry. Draco just looked at her, silverish eyes filled with concern.

Thankfully, any questions were prevented as the Sorting Hat broke out into song, and the deputy headmistress promptly started calling out names. Holly watched with bated breath as the mysterious girl, Luna Lovegood, stared at the Hat blankly for a moment before she approached, curtsied, and set the Hat on her head.

A minute passed and then two. It almost looked as if the Hat and the child were having a very in-depth conversation. The girl's face would alternately tighten and relax, while the Hat occasionally scowled.

Finally, around the time the students became restless and the teachers looked at each other with concern, the Hat shouted, "Ravenclaw." Though, it seemed far less sure about this decision than it normally was.

It watched with sightless eye-holes as the girl offered another curtsy and wandered with seeming aimlessness over to the exceptionally quiet Eagle's table. Alé and her friend Sophia, who was sitting there instead of with her House, both clapped. So did Gavin, his friends at the Slytherin table, and Professor Flitwick, but they were among the few. In fact, it seemed like only a few people were cheering for their new, and decidedly strange, student.

The rest of the Sorting passed without incident, Ginny Weasley going to Gryffindor seconds after the Hat touched her head, despite her unhappy frown. Soon, Dumbledore made his announcements, and Professor Lockhart was introduced. Thankfully, almost none of the Slytherins cheered for him, and it was only a few girls who did. Finally, food graced the tables, much to the delight of the hungry masses.

The meal was an exceptional one, the food as good as always, but Holly just couldn't seem to focus on eating. Her eyes were drawn to the Ravenclaw table and the mysterious first-year, who was given a wide berth by her year-mates. Luna ate her meal dreamily, which basically meant that she was wool-gathering, while her hand and fork brought food to her mouth seemingly of their own free will. Occasionally, the same hand, the girl's left, would bring her drink as well.

Holly studied her almost the entire meal, barely eating anything. She only stopped when Milli threatened to force feed her if she didn't eat more. The small girl complied; however, her eyes were continuously drawn back to the Ravenclaw.

Eventually, dinner ended, and the students made their way to the dorms. Holly walked to the dungeons in between Theo and Gavin, who were unhappy with their earlier interruption. The two boys talked to her the entire way down, gently leading her into a conversation about the earlier part of her summer. It was only due to her distracted state, still thinking about Luna Lovegood, that Holly accidentally

mentioned that the Weasleys had be forced to rescue her from the Dursleys. It was a fact that surprised the whole group, Blaise included, as they had all thought the Weasleys had simply picked her up. They hadn't known that the redheads had to bust her out of her barred and locked bedroom with Vernon furiously bellowing at them.

Moments later, a now thoroughly embarrassed Holly was thankful that they reached the portrait. She all but shouted the password that Flint had told her earlier and darted inside. Her year-mates, who had been trying to question her further, rushed in after her, but all they got for their efforts was a hurried "goodnight." The Slytherin dashed up the hall, bypassing the entrancing unicorn portrait without a glance. Her roommates were hot on her heels with Milli in the lead, and Holly didn't pause as she hurried into their room. She hopped onto her bed, closing the hangings and spelling them to stay that way thanks to a nifty little charm she had discovered during the summer. The girl heard the others attempt to open them with no luck, finally settling for pounding to get her attention.

Yet, Holly ignored them and chose to climb over her bed into her reading corner, the name she used to refer to the almost three metre space between her bed and the wall. The previous year she had put in a chair, a lovely, deep-green armchair Titania Shackbolt and Solaris Morningstar had transfigured for her, and moved the curtain from her bed on that side, making it extend to the wall instead. The total effect was a small curtained off area solely for her personal use.

Smiling, the Slytherin climbed into her chair, pulling a book out of her pocket. It was a habit from years past, but one she was glad that she had retained as she settled in.

About an hour later, Holly finally put it down, deciding that it was now safe to get ready to sleep. Unluckily, her trunk was at the foot of her bed, which was outside of her curtained off area. Removing the spell on her hangings, she peeked out and discovered that the others were all asleep. She changed quickly and quietly before she climbed into bed, setting her internal alarm clock to wake her up early.

The next morning, Holly was the first up as usual, showering and dressing before the others were even awake. She grabbed all of her

books, tucked her wand into her new holster, and was leaving just as Cynthia, another early riser, began to stir. She made her way down the hall, glancing at her favourite portrait that featured the unicorns. She went into the Common Room, where she saw the Muggleborn and Muggle-raised first-years speaking with Solaris. Holly left through the main entrance, reaching the Great Hall in minutes and discovering that she was the first one there, not even the professors were at their table yet.

She sat down at the completely bare table, the food appearing as soon as she did. Shrugging, she helped herself, propping up the same book from the night before. Slowly, in ones and twos, the other students and a few teachers began to trickle in. Her second-year friends eventually joined her, all of them attempting to talk to her, but Holly merely offered them a polite greeting before retreating behind her book. Seeing that their efforts were in vain, they stopped, and she magically reappeared, joining in the conversation about the classes for the year.

Titania appeared with their timetables, grimacing when Draco asked about Defence lessons.

Glancing at her schedule, Holly exhaled with relief when she noticed that she didn't have Lockhart's class until Wednesday, two days away. She had Transfiguration with Ravenclaw first thing, followed by Herbology, and then Charms with Hufflepuff.

Shortly thereafter, the group made their way to McGonagall's class, where Blaise purposely partnered with Holly. He didn't attempt to grill her again, choosing to merely observe her the entire lesson. They walked out of the class an hour later, each carrying several transfigured buttons, and to Herbology, where they repotted Mandrakes. Blaise sat with Holly once more and then again in Charms that afternoon, much to Draco's dismay as he ended up with a rather irritating boy named Ernie McMillan. The brunet seemed to know that Holly didn't want to talk about the Dursleys, but he still wanted to show his silent support. Or maybe he was making sure that he would definitely be there when she did finally feel like speaking.

Dinner was met with the same behaviour; however, this time, Blaise gently but firmly gripped her by the elbow as they left the Great Hall and led her to the dorms, preventing her from retreating to the library like she had planned. He guided her into the Common Room and down the hall to one of the study rooms, the other second-years shuffling in behind them.

The sight that greeted Holly as she looked around the well-lit room surprised her. The furniture was pushed back against the walls, leaving an open space in the centre. Yet, it wasn't the new position of the tables that shocked her, but rather it was what was on them. There was an enormous chocolate cake with green and silvery icing and already lit candles. Next to it was a mountain of presents.

Her eyes widening, the girl whipped around to face Blaise. "What? What's going on?"

He grinned widely, showing all of his very white teeth. "A party!" he replied slyly. "Can't you tell?"

"Party?" Holly questioned with confusion, reduced to single word inquiries.

"Yes, for your birthday since we missed it," Milli answered with a huff, coming up to her other side. "Well, not just your birthday. Gavin's and Autumn's, too, since they were both during the summer. Oh, and Theo's since it's next week.

Pansy stated from the back to the group, "We were going to tell you about it last night in the dorms, but you had spelled your curtains shut."

"But," Blaise put in, casually wrapping his arm around his shoulder, "you thought we were going to confront you, which we won't. If you don't feel up to talking about it, then we won't force you," he stated, looking her straight in the eye. "We were just worried about you last night. We were acting quite peculiar at dinner."

"Oh," was Holly's response. "But you already sent me things, and I already mailed Gavin and Autumn their gifts."

"We know. But your gifts were lost, so we got you new ones," Theo responded from his place by the cake. "We sent them things then also. All the stuff on the table is yours." He waved his hand at the mountain of presents, hitting one of them in his enthusiasm. "We just wanted a chance to have cake with each other."

"But what about you?"

"Oh, they're not giving me anything until my birthday," he replied cheerfully, repositioning the blue and gold package. "It's my party, too. I just don't get to open until later."

"But... I mean..." Holly tried, but she couldn't seem to form the words.

Understanding her plight, Blaise guided her to the seat in front of the cake. "It's all right, Holly. Everything is fine." He patted her shoulder soothingly.

Holly sat, completely dumbfounded; she hadn't expected this in the slightest, even her telepathy hadn't warned. Her eyes moved from the cake and presents to Blaise. The boy had to have known. In fact, he was probably the one who had planned it all. He had wanted to surprise her, and maybe that was what truly shocked her. It wasn't that they had given her something for her birthday, though that was a surprise also. It was that they had bought her new things when the other presents were lost and that they had actually planned a party for her. They had put forth effort for her, something that the Dursleys sure as Circe had never done.

A smile blossomed on her face, and she finally regained herself. "I... thank you." She glanced around, belatedly noticing that the others had taken seats, too. "Thank you, everyone." She felt a lump form in her throat, and her eyes were becoming conspicuously moist.

She was saved from embarrassment by Draco.

"Well, you're welcome. Now, let's eat!" He eyed the cake hungrily, actually taking a swipe of the icing and receiving a smack from Pansy for his efforts.

Holly laughed and moved to blow out the candles with the others.

AN: I always thought that it was complete bollocks that Harry never got a party in canon, so I just had to fix it. Also, I thought it rather lousy that, even though they sent him things, he never got anything for his birthday in second-year. Personally, I know that if my gift to someone was lost, I would have bought them something else to make up for it.

For everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Fourteen: Looney Lovegood

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Fourteen: Looney Lovegood

Remus,

You'll never guess what has happened to me in the last two days. First, Blaise, Draco, and I missed the train to Hogwarts. For some strange reason, the barrier would not let us through. Blaise's father, Dante, had to Floo us to Hogsmeade, and we explored the village for several hours before the carriage came. Dante took us to the Post Office, Honeydukes, and Zonko's before feeding us lunch at the Three Broomsticks. We even got to see the Shrieking Shack; it's supposed to be the most haunted building in Britain...

...However, the most exciting thing actually happened today. Just a few hours ago, my friends threw me a birthday party in one of the study rooms! Well, the party wasn't just for me; it was for everyone that had a birthday over the summer...

...Well, I must be going to bed. I have Potions tomorrow morning, and you know how much I simply love that class.

Sincerely,
Holly

P.S.

I hope you like the book I am sending. I saw it when I was in Hogsmeade, and I thought that you would enjoy it since you like Defence so much. I heard that one of the co-authors, Alastor Moody, was a top Auror. The other author, Dominic Boyd, is known for his pro-Dark Creatures stance with Ministry policy. I flipped through it at the bookshop and was so interested that I bought a copy for myself as well.

Holly finished her late-night letter and glanced at the clock, shaking her head when she noticed the time. She had run upstairs right after her party had ended, eager to tell Remus what had occurred. Yet, when she got there she had remembered that she promised to write him as soon as reached the school, so she guiltily mentioned the excitement from the previous day also.

Silently berating herself, the Slytherin set the letter aside and turned off her light, falling asleep almost instantly. She woke gradually the next morning, rousing before any of her roommates. She quickly showered and dressed, carefully checking that her wand was in her new holster and heading down to the Common Room. She idly petted Mr. Momo, Blaise's cat, and scratched behind his sensitive white ears as she waited for the others to come down. Her mind kept wandering back to the party that had been held the night before, her first ever birthday party, and she couldn't help but blush when she thought about how wonderful her friends were to actually have one for her. It was an exceptionally kind thing to do, and Holly silently promised herself that she would return the favour. Still, she would have to wait until November to start as that was when Pansy's birthday was.

About twenty minutes later, after the white and black cat had been thoroughly pampered, Blaise and Draco finally arrived. The trio headed for the Great Hall, sitting down at the nearly empty Slytherin table. They chatted absentmindedly before realising that their first lesson of the day was Potions, which of course caused Holly to scowl.

"Oh, don't worry, Hols," Draco put in, setting his fork down. "Partner with me in Potions. That way Professor Snape won't say anything to you," he stated with a smile, obliquely acknowledging the fact that he was the Potion master's favourite. He casually watched as Hedwig came by for a few strips of bacon, almost hitting Holly with her wing as she landed.

Blaise laughed, making the girl frown at him as she attached her letter to the owl's leg. "Yes, then he can only glare at you, but he normally does that anyway."

The girl's scowl deepened as she snatched her hand back from Hedwig, the bird nipping a bit too hard. Apparently, the owl was somewhat disgruntled by Holly's delay in arriving at Hogwarts, and she was making her displeasure known.

However, the blond interrupted before Holly could say anything, inspecting her hand as he talked. "Just keep your head down like always." He gently wiped away the drops of blood with his napkin.

“It’ll be fine, Holly. I promise.” He softly tapped the cut with his wand, and a clear wrap covered it.

Sometime later, Holly pushed her breakfast dishes away, pulling a book from her pocket and beginning to read, Blaise looking over her shoulder. She scanned through the volume, one that was ironically enough written by Hogwarts’ own Potions master, refreshing the subject in her mind. However, she was distracted by the appearance of the mysterious blonde girl at the Ravenclaw table.

Green eyes watched as the first-year aimlessly wandered over to a seat, as if in a daze. She absentmindedly pulled a plateful of toast to her and munched on a piece as she stared off into the distance, completely ignoring the fact that the rest of the first-years sat far away from her. They all brought their heads together, whispering hurriedly, and glanced at her before laughing rather loudly. A few of the older students shot them disapproving looks and attempted to catch Luna’s eye, but she completely ignored them all.

Eventually, the students got the hint and stopped trying. Several moments after that, just as the girl was about to rise and leave, a few of the other first-years, the same ones who had been laughing at her earlier, approached. They filled in the area behind her so that she couldn’t escape.

Holly stiffened in her seat as soon as she noticed the Ravenclaw students. She couldn’t hear what the children were saying to Luna, but she did see the blonde begin to tremble and could feel the waves of fear rolling off of her. Blaise and Draco exchanged glances behind her back, while the other Slytherins gazed at Holly, seeing her staring at the Ravenclaw. Belatedly, Blaise attracted Alé’s attention. The older girl nodded at him, and she and Sofia, who was sitting with her today, instantly shooed the first-years away. The two attempted to talk to Luna, but as soon as the way was clear, the blonde tore out of the Great Hall, leaving them in her wake.

Holly attempted to rise and follow after her, but Blaise caught her wrist, shaking his head.

“Not now, Holly. We have Potions in ten minutes. Snape will flay you alive and use you as an ingredient if you don’t show up.” His eyes flitted to the Ravenclaw table. “Besides, Alé is following after her.”

Theo nodded across the table, having seen the whole thing. “We have to get going.” He stood, offering Milli a hand up.

Holly sighed and rose to her feet. Blaise cordially took her arm, escorting her to the dungeons, where she spent the next hour avoiding Snape’s blank stares and twitching eyebrows. She listened as he praised Draco and ignored her.

Nevertheless, during the entire lesson her mind kept drifting back to Luna Lovegood, a faint suspicion rising in her heart.

That evening, Holly sauntered down the corridor away from Professor Flitwick’s office, hitching her bag on her shoulder. The two had just had a scintillating discussion about Charms, their first this year, and the Slytherin was now on her way back to the dorms. It was almost curfew, their talk having run late, and she had to hurry. Thankfully, she had already finished her homework for the day.

However, just as Holly turned the last corner near the stairs, she heard the sounds of a scuffle. She peeked around the bend, noticing a thin brunet boy towering over the mysterious first-year, Luna. The girl was kneeling on the ground, picking up what appeared to be the scattered contents of her school bag. The boy smirked at her, purposely stepping on her parchment and spilling her ink on the stone floor.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Looney,” he apologised without any trace of sincerity. “Did I just step on your things?”

With a grimace, Holly whipped around the corner, coming right up behind the boy. The urge to protect the Ravenclaw was like a clawing monster in her chest, and she was more than happy to oblige it.

“Excuse me,” she stated, moving close by him, causing him to step back. Holly stooped next to the girl and began picking up books, inks, and parchment, completely ignoring the startled looks she was receiving from the other two.

“What’re you doing?” the boy asked suddenly, glaring down at her. His hazel eyes slid to the scar on her forehead and widened dramatically.

“Me? I am helping her pick up her books. I think it to be rather obvious,” she responded, finally looking up at him. Holly studied the boy, and to her surprise, she noticed that he was wearing blue and bronze trimmed robes with a blue-stripped tie.

He was a Ravenclaw.

Luna was being harassed by her own Housemate.

Holly blazed with anger, but she quickly quelled it and turned back to the task at hand. “I also think that a Ravenclaw ought to be smart enough to comprehend.” She picked up the final book and began stacking things. “Apparently, I was mistaken,” the Slytherin responded, sounding very much like Professor Snape in that moment.

She neatly handed the other girl’s things back to her and stood, offering her a hand. Luna owlishly blinked at her, looking first to the offered hand and then to Holly’s face. She stuffed her things in her bag and took the hand, rising to her feet.

Instantly, Holly stiffened, feeling like lightning was shooting through her veins. It was just like the jolt she had felt when she had first touched Blaise and Draco. It didn’t feel more powerful, however, just much more concentrated.

The Slytherin almost staggered, barely catching herself, and she dazedly blinked at Luna. Belatedly, she noticed the look of pure shock on the other girl’s face before hastily releasing her. The blonde took a step backwards and away from Holly.

The wizard gaped at Holly as she stood, though it was due to her friendliness to Luna and not her sudden odd behaviour. He simply stared, at a complete loss for words.

Unfortunately, it was short-lived.

Her words finally sinking in, he frowned. "This is none of your concern," he spat in an oddly whiny voice. He snarled at the Slytherin, growling like a deranged bugbear.

Holly smirked, her expression one that all members of her House seemed to have perfected. "Obviously, I have made it my concern."

Once more, her likeness to the Potions master was uncanny.

He didn't have a response to that, so instead he stomped away. However, just before he left, the Ravenclaw boy shoved Luna into her, causing Holly to drop her bag in order to catch the other girl. She landed in the Slytherin's arms, almost sending the both of them crashing to the floor. Holly steadied them both and reached down to pick up her bag, shaking her head when she noticed one of her ink bottles had smashed on her books.

"Thank you," a quiet voice whispered.

Holly's head snapped up, and a soothing wave washed over her as she looked up at the Ravenclaw girl.

"Thank you for helping me." Luna had simply watched the exchange with a shocked sort of fascination, and this was the first time Holly had ever heard her speak.

"You're welcome," the older girl responded, a smile gracing her face.

She stared directly up at Luna, who was studying her in return. There was just something about this girl, something that drew Holly to her. There was something about her person, her mind that called to the Slytherin.

Instinctively, she mentally reached out, already knowing in her heart what she would find.

Holly gasped. "You're like me," she whispered.

Sapphire eyes widened with fright. "I don't know what you mean." She took another step back.

The Slytherin gazed at her sadly and searched around with her senses. She even looked around just to be sure. Not finding anyone else, not even a portrait, she leaned forward.

“Mind Mage,” she murmured.

Luna looked as if she had been slapped. “No. No, you mustn’t say such things when there could be others listening.”

She trembled and also glanced around for an instant. Her gaze burned into Holly’s, and she cocked her head to the side. Finally, she seemed to have reached some sort of decision.

“Do you have somewhere we could talk? Somewhere we won’t be overheard?”

Holly could feel the other girl’s unease. “Yes, but not right now. It’ll have to wait until tomorrow. My roommates will most likely be gone between afternoon lessons and dinner.” She thought for a moment. “I can meet you at the Great Hall and bring you to my dorm. No one would think anything of a Ravenclaw there,” she hurriedly assured the younger girl.

The blonde nodded hurriedly, glancing around again. “I have to go, but thank you.”

And with that, she was gone, hurrying around the same corner Holly had just passed. And the Slytherin felt as though all the air had been driven from her chest.

Holly stared after the other student, watching as the golden hair disappeared around the bend. She stayed that way for several moments, the hurt gradually leaving, before shaking her head and reaching for her bag once more. She sighed as she again noticed that the ink was dripping all over. With a whispered spell, she froze it, but off the top of her head, Holly didn’t know how to remove it completely. She would have to go look up the charm.

The Slytherin quickly hurried down the corridor to the Common Room; she waved at those she knew as she passed, giving Gavin and Theo a nod and indicating her bag as her reason for not staying.

Theo smiled with understanding, but the other boy waved her over, telling her that there was a spell to remove the stain in the next to last chapter of their Charms book. It was a fact she had already known, but she was grateful, nonetheless.

Giving her thanks, Holly hurried up the hallway to her dorm. Setting her bag on the floor, she dug out her Charms book from it, only to realise that it was coated with dark-blue ink. The girl growled and stomped over to Milli, who had risen from her bed and had come over to help, borrowing her book instead. Holly waved off the heavy-set girl and began removing things from her bag, setting them on the floor. With the Freezing charm on the ink, it wouldn't transfer to the carpet, a good thing since Holly was partial to the colour.

She examined her various possessions, muttering the incantation and watching as the ink completely vanished. Smiling enormously now, she reached for the last thing, and to her shock, she noted that it didn't have any ink on it at all. The Slytherin opened it, flipping through quickly, but the pages were completely blank, no stain anywhere. She snapped it shut excitedly, eyes studying the black book, and she turned it around with her hands.

Suddenly, she gasped, running her fingers along the initials at the bottom.

T. M. Riddle.

It was the diary.

A suspicion in her mind, Holly quickly packed away her things, leaving out a quill and another bottle of ink. The girl stood and walked over to her bed, sinking gratefully into the mattress with a sigh. Dipping her quill into the well, she opened the diary to the first blank page.

Hello?

Holly watched as the black liquid sank into the page.

One minute passed and then two.

She sighed and pushed the book away, placing it still opened on the chair in the corner. She climbed to her feet, preparing for bed. She changed her clothes, brushed her teeth, combed out her hair, and slipped beneath the covers.

The Slytherin turned on her side, giving one final glance to the diary before she fell asleep. If she had stayed awake just a moment longer, she would have seen the ink reappearing on the page, forming new words.

Hello? Is someone there?

The next day dawned bright and clear, bringing with it something Holly had been dreading since the summer: Lockhart's class. She shut the diary that morning without even looking at it before she walked to breakfast, and the girl trudged from the Great Hall to the Defence corridor, her equally unhappy friends in front of her.

In the lead, Milli growled with each step. In her opinion, Lockhart was the biggest pansy in the entire world. Honestly, no man should wear lurid pink robes, unless his name was Albus Dumbledore or he was very secure in his sexuality, but those were different cases entirely. The fact that the Defence professor had come up to Holly that morning and had tried to give her fame tips did not help his case at all, nor the fact that he had insisted on grabbing her to keep her from running away.

Just behind her, Theo was blank-faced, obviously wishing that Gavin had this lesson with hi, so that the two could sit in the back row and poke fun at the dandy. Sadly, the other boy was in Charms with his Housemates.

Next came Pansy, who was hovering in between Gregory and Vince; the three were flicking through one of the berk's books, laughing and pointing at various parts. Cynthia and Daphne were following directly behind them, trying to convince Autumn that the professor was not the greatest thing since self-inking quills. Lastly, Draco and Blaise flanked Holly on each side, both trying to console her about the strange Gryffindor first-year that had come up to her during breakfast and the entire Lockhart fiasco.

“Don’t worry about the little freak, Holly.” Draco assured her, running his hands through his hair, “We’ll keep him away from you, and we’ll make sure he does not try to take anymore photos.”

“For such a tiny midget, he quite is annoying, isn’t he?” Pansy commented absentmindedly, belatedly noticing Holly scowl at her. “Oh, sorry, Hols. I forgot that he is the same height as you.” She tentatively smiled at the much shorter girl, who only came up to her chin.

The small Slytherin gave her a blank face and sighed but didn’t say anything. She crossed her arms over her chest in almost a defensive gesture.

“Nevertheless,” Draco put in dramatically. “We will keep him away from you, midget or not.” He added in an undertone so that only Blaise and Holly could hear, “If we can even see him as close to the ground as he is.” He gave the girl his most charming smile and winked.

She again sighed, but a weak smile tugged at her lips, just as the blond had intended.

Blaise sniggered before nodding emphatically. “That Creevey kid will not come within five metres of you. We will keep him away, won’t we?” he asked his fellow Slytherins, trying to direct the conversation away from Holly’s height, something of a sensitive subject.

“Yes.”

“Of course.”

“You bet your broomstick.”

“Lockhart, too. I was embarrassed **for you** this morning, Holly,” Draco stated, grimacing. “That paedophile should keep his hands to himself and not keep trying to touch you all the time.” He sniffed disdainfully, looking distinctly disgusted by the adult’s behaviour.

Theo cut in, “If either of them comes near you again, we’ll give them to Peeves.”

"No," Milli corrected the boy, "we will give them to the Weasley twins." She chuckled to herself darkly.

"That's an idea," Theo acknowledged, his light-brown eyes sparkling with mischief. "You could ask the twins to keep Creevey away from you. Or even better, ask the Gryffindor trio," he stated, meaning Neville, Ron, and Hermione. "I am not sure about Lockhart though."

Holly frowned, finally commenting. "The twins would definitely work, but I am not exactly certain about the others."

Everyone looked at her strangely.

Blaise, taking pity on her, responded in her stead. "The last part probably wouldn't work too well. Ron would probably want photos of his own."

Milli wrinkled her nose. "Don't tell me; he fancies you!"

Holly nodded meekly

"Neville, too," Pansy added, batting her blonde eyelashes. "I've seen the way he looked at you at the end of last year. He puts creepy Creevey to shame."

Holly groaned. "Is that why Neville has avoided me for the past two days? He's embarrassed?"

Cynthia laughed and nudged both Autumn and Daphne. "Got it in one."

"Not that I can really blame him," Daphne responded loftily. "He only spends time with two girls, Holly and Hermione."

"And what sane person would want to date Miss Prissy Hermione Granger?" Milli asked, half-turning around. "She's liable to nag a man to death within the first three days."

"Certainly not me," Theo replied, fiddling with the quill he had just filched from the heavy-set girl's school bag.

Behind him, Greg and Vincent shuddered at the mere thought.

“Are you saying that you fancy Holly, too, Theo?” Draco questioned in a sweet tone, silver eyes glinting wickedly. “Poor Granger will be so heartbroken.”

Pansy chuckled impishly. “Our little Miss Potter is rather popular with the boys, isn’t she, Milli?” she inquired in a false undertone.

The chubby girl snorted. “Must be her winning personality. Not to mention her dainty good looks, keen intelligence, incredible talent for Quidditch, veritable fortune, fame... I could go on.”

“Hols just has it all, doesn’t she?” Pansy put in, pushing a stray strand of hair from her face. “Even has her very own stalkers now.”

Draco mischievously smiled. “First, obsessive Ginny. Then, obsessive Weasley brother. Now, obsessive first-year and obsessive friend. You’re just racking up fans left and right.” He wrapped his arm around her shoulder amicably. “I guess that means you’ll be avoiding the Gryffindors for the time being.” He seemed quite pleased by the prospect.

Holly replied darkly, “I suspect so. Hermione and the twins will be the only safe ones to approach. The others are liable to mob me.” She shuddered. “Why does this have to happen to me? Why does it always happen to me?”

Draco squeezed her tightly. “As Milli said, that’s what you get for being an exceptionally famous celebrity, ridiculously wealthy, and a fabulous Seeker.”

Holly didn’t quite know how to respond to that, especially the rich comment. She simply shook her head in dismay.

The group continued down the corridor, quickly reaching the Defence room, and they queued up outside, leaning against the wall on either side of the entrance. A few moments later, the door swung open, no dandies in sight, and they filed in. Holly sat in the middle, knowing that if she sat in the front she’d have nothing to look at save Lockhart himself but understanding that he would be more likely to pick on her

if she was in the back. With a smirk, she piled all seven books for the class in front of her so that she would have an excuse not to look at the real thing.

Theo, who was sitting next to Holly, leaned over to whisper in her ear. "I promise that we'll keep the maniacs away as best we can. Although," he allowed, winking impishly, "you better hope that Creevey, the Weasleys, and Neville do not join up. Else, they'll be starting a Holly Potter fan club."

"Oh, be quiet," Holly snapped.

The last thing she needed was for Lockhart to hear the phrase "Holly Potter fan club", especially considering the way he had already been trying to corner her.

It was at that very moment that the dandy himself strutted in, wearing turquoise robes and looking very much like a peacock. He smiled brightly at them, flashing all of his teeth. The whole class was silent, and Lockhart cleared his throat loudly. He reached forward and picked up Milli's copy of Gadding with Ghouls, almost dropping it on her in the process.

The heavy-set girl growled menacingly, giving him a glare even Snape would have been proud of. However, the teacher didn't seem to notice. Instead, he caught the book and held it up to show his own winking and beaming portrait on the cover.

Holly felt like she would sick up at any moment, and the class had just started.

"Me," he announced loudly, pointing at it and winking as well.

There were several sniggers from the back of the room, specifically from Blaise and Draco's table.

"Like we hadn't noticed the similarities. Hm..." The grey-eyed boy started to tick off his fingers. "Both look like pompous peacocks. Both smile like idiots. Both show no discernable intelligence," Draco whispered to his tablemate, and Blaise was forced to turn his resulting laugh into a cough.

“Gilderoy Lockhart,” the ponce carried on, not hearing them. “Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defence League, and five-time winner of *Witch Weekly*’s Most-Charming-Smile Award – but I don’t talk about that. I didn’t get rid of the Bandon Banshee by **smiling** at her!”

He waited for them to laugh, but he received only blank stares and a girly sigh from Autumn as she dreamily gazed at him.

“I don’t know,” Pansy murmured to Daphne. “He probably blinded her with those teeth. They’re freakishly white.”

The brown-haired girl snickered.

Lockhart, again not having heard, continued, “I see you’ve all bought a complete set of my books. Well done. I thought we’d start today with a little quiz. Nothing to worry about – just to check how well you’ve read them, how much you’ve taken in.”

The Slytherins exchanged sceptical looks, each grimacing as Lockhart handed out the quizzes.

Afterwards, the dandy returned to the front. “You have thirty minutes. Start... **now!**”

Holly sighed, exchanged a glance with Theo, and looked down at her paper. She read:

1. *What is Gilderoy Lockhart’s favourite colour?*
2. *What is Gilderoy Lockhart’s secret ambition?*
3. *What, in your opinion, is Gilderoy Lockhart’s greatest achievement to date?*

It went on forever, over three sheets of paper, right down to:

54. *When is Gilderoy Lockhart’s birthday, and what would his ideal gift be?*

Holly felt like banging her head on the desk.

Afterwards, Lockhart collected the papers and rifled through them in front of the class.

“Tut, tut – hardly any of you remembered that my favourite colour is lilac. I say so in Year with the Yeti. And a few of you need to read Wanderings with Werewolves more carefully. I clearly state in chapter twelve that my ideal birthday gift would be harmony between all magic and non-magic peoples, though I wouldn’t say no to a large bottle of Ogden’s Old Firewhisky!”

He gave them yet another wicked wink.

Pansy and her tablemate Daphne along with Cynthia, who was sitting across the row, ignored him. They had a deck of cards out underneath the table and were now playing a game. Theo was leaning back in his chair, apparently dozing, and Holly had to nudge him with her elbow to wake him up. Milli was currently staring at Lockhart with an expression of complete and utter disgust, her fingers clearly itching for her wand. Blaise prodded Draco and muttered in his ear, saying something that was probably very naughty, and the blond quickly whispered back. Greg Goyle and Vincent Crabbe, who were sitting opposite Holly, were shaking with silent laughter. Autumn, on the other hand, was listening to Lockhart with rapt attention, her head propped up on her hands. She gave a start when he looked at her.

Holly’s attention returned to the front. She had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, one which was confirmed when the man turned to her.

“...but Miss Holly Potter knew my secret ambition is to rid the world of evil and market my own range of hair-care potions. Good girl!”

The Slytherin silently cursed her love of books, which had led her to read all of Lockhart’s no matter how slimy she found the writer to be. She also cursed her memory, which had allowed her to remember so much of the useless information within them.

“In fact, full marks, Miss Potter!” He beamed at her, receiving a blank stare in response. “Excellent! Quite excellent! Take ten points for Slytherin! And so to business...” He bent down behind his empty desk and lifted an enormous, covered cage onto it. “Now, I have been

saving this surprise since Monday. I wanted to use it for my Gryffindor class, but I needed someone made of sterner stuff.” His creepy eyes all but ogled Holly, who would have shifted uneasily if Theo hadn’t placed his hand on her knee underneath the table.

“Be warned! It is my job to arm you against the foulest creatures known to wizardkind! You may find yourselves facing your worst fears in this room. Know only that no harm can befall you whilst I am here. All I ask is that you remain calm,” the ponce announced.

Holly exchanged a grimace with her tablemate behind the professor’s back. He patted her arm, and she didn’t even flinch away. Rolling her eyes, the girl leaned back in her chair, refusing to watch as the smarmy git placed his hand on the cover.

Greg and Vince were still laughing, apparently not caring if he caught them. Milli was giving him the evil eye in her front row seat.

“I must ask you not to scream,” Lockhart said in a low voice. “It might provoke them.”

As one, the Slytherins frowned at his dramatics, not buying it at all. Nonetheless, the teacher didn’t notice, whipping off the cover.

“Yes,” he stated spectacularly, waving his arms, “**Freshly caught Cornish pixies.**”

Milli finally lost control of herself. She let out a snigger that even Lockhart couldn’t mistake for a scream of terror. In fact, she kept laughing for several moments, actually reddening in the process and gasping for breath.

“Er... yes?” Lockhart smiled nervously.

The chubby girl continued chuckling. “They’re not very **dangerous**, are they? After all, my great aunt raises them for pets; she’s over a hundred and has no problems.”

The ponce wagged a finger annoyingly at her. “Don’t be so sure! Devilish tricky little blighters they can be!”

The electric blue pixies squealed at him as his hand reached for the latch.

“Right, then,” he stated dramatically and quite loudly. “Let’s see what you make of them!”

And he opened the cage.

It was pandemonium, or at least, it would have been had it been in another second-year class. Most of the students instantly stood, wands drawn, and cursed any pixies that dared approach them. Milli bared her teeth in excitement as she dragged a shocked Autumn behind her and hit three incoming pixies with a Bat Bogey hex. She continuously backed away from the front and the majority of the pests, taking the Muggleborn girl with her.

Holly leapt to her feet. She along with Theo jinxed any pixies that tried to flank their classmates. Draco and Blaise rushed to the middle of the room, erecting a simple Shield charm together.

The pixies bounced back, now having only one place to go. Almost as one, they turned and headed for the only person not shooting spells.

Lockhart’s eyes widened. “*Peskipiksi Pesternomi!*”

However, it didn’t do a thing. Two of the pests snatched his wand and threw it toward the now broken windows. The professor panicked and dashed out of the room, choosing to save himself.

Growling at the man’s cowardice and sheer incompetence, Holly sidestepped the Shield charm, which was still there and still strong, and approached the front of the room. She lifted her wand above her head.

“*Immobulus,*” she stated fiercely, her eyes glowing brightly.

Instantly, all the pixies froze, a number of them crashing into the walls or other objects with the force of her spell.

She turned to her fellow Slytherins, all of whom were smirking. Within a minute, all of the pixies were back in their cage.

Holly looked around, noticing the bedlam in the front of the room. Some of Lockhart's pictures of himself had been ripped from the walls, the occupants weeping heartily. His chair was overturned, the back nearly pulled off, and his desk was a mess, papers strewn everywhere. It looked like either a tornado or the Weasley twins had blown through.

And Holly just couldn't help herself. She laughed.

About two hours before dinner, Holly waited outside the Great Hall with her back to the wall, flipping through one of the additional Defence texts she had picked up during the summer. She looked up as a familiar presence flooded her senses, and a shadow fell over her.

It was Luna.

Holly smiled and climbed to her feet, a feeling of complete calm washing over her. "Hello. How are you today?" She indicated that the other girl should walk beside her.

The Ravenclaw blinked. "Better. Your friend – Gavin, I believe – he was nice to me today."

"Really?" Holly questioned as she led Luna down the stairs and into the dungeons. She revelled in the soothing essence of the girl beside her.

Luna nodded. "Yes, he smiled and chased away three other boys from me." She matched the older girl's pace, but at the same time, she still managed to look like she was floating on air. "They were mean; they made fun of my earrings. Do you like them?"

Holly studied the jewellery as she came up to the portrait entrance of the Common Room; they were a pair of pastel-blue pineapples.

"Yes," she answered honestly and couldn't help but smile. "They are quite unusual; where did you get them?"

They stopped in front of Elizabeth and Francis, the portrait people.

“Oh, I made them. It was quite easy,” she replied, beaming at the picture’s denizens.

They beamed back.

“Would you like me to show you?”

“Yes,” the Slytherin answered without hesitation. “*Fidelius Rex*.”

The portrait people waved, and it swung open. Holly walked across the Common Room, the blonde trailing behind her. She nodded to Titania Shacklebolt and Timothy Nott, the fifth-year Prefects, who were in deep conversation about their Transfiguration essays. Holly ushered Luna over to one of the doors, the younger girl having stopped to study the décor.

Thankfully, the Ravenclaw allowed herself to be led inside. She trailed after Holly through yet another door and up the inclined hall, nodding as the Slytherin held the final door open for her. Without hesitation, she headed for the bed in the corner, Holly’s bed, and stood by it.

The older girl raised an eyebrow and directed Luna to the chair off to the side. She reached out her senses, ensuring that there was no one else near by, and closed the curtains around her bed and the space next to it. She quickly cast the Sticking charm, keeping her mind open to check for intruders.

“There’s something strange about you,” Luna put in without preamble from the chair. “I felt drawn to you from the moment I saw you. It was like the opposites poles of a magnet.”

Holly blinked. She hadn’t expected that, though she probably should have.

“I could say the same of you.” She sat on the edge of her bed. “I felt something similar.”

The Ravenclaw nodded with understanding. “Is that how you figured out I was a Mind Mage?”

"In part. I just suspected until I actually got close to you." Holly paused, considering. "I knew as soon as I touched your mind." She shook her head. "I just knew."

"You're a telepath?" Luna asked with interest.

"Yes, but I'm not sure if that is all I am. I've never been tested," she stated honestly.

Blaise and she had researched Mind Magic, but they hadn't tested her for any additional abilities as the spells needed were complex. They had decided to wait until they knew more about magic. Hopefully, they would be able to by next summer.

"I'm a telepath, too, and a Seer with touch of a Finder's gift. I didn't need to be tested. I'm like my mum; she taught me until she died." Luna held up a hand to keep Holly from expressing her condolences, continuing her monologue. "My dad knew about it before he married her; he didn't mind at all. He is from an old family, one that respected such things."

"I'm self-trained," Holly admitted. "I was raised by Muggles, who knew nothing about magic, and obviously, you know what happened to my parents. Everything I know I taught myself."

The blonde studied her. "What can you do?"

The older girl exhaled. The pull towards the blonde was still there, urging her to tell the Luna everything.

"I can shield my mind, block out the voices completely. I can read surface thoughts and do deep scans, but I'm not very good at those. I can sense people without reading minds, but I have a limited range, about twenty metres in any direction." She thought about it. "I can send thoughts, speak mind to mind with a non-telepath."

The Ravenclaws head snapped up. "You've told someone else about it. Someone not like us" She was holding her breath.

"Yes," Holly confessed. "I trust him with my life, and I haven't said anything about you to him. He's my best friend; he would never tell

anyone.” She climbed off the bed and looked Luna directly in the eyes. “I **know** he would never harm me in any way.”

Luna gazed at her and nodded. “He follows the Old Ways, doesn’t he? The ways where we were respected and honoured, not denied and feared. How it was before other influences leeches in.”

The Slytherin responded, “Yes, but regardless of that, I still trust him.”

“That’s good. Just make sure that your other friends are trustworthy before you tell them.” Luna whispered faintly, “The Ministry denies our existence for the most part, but they know we are real, and they fear us. Others do as well. They’ll harm you if they find out, especially if they know you’re a telepath; they’re the most feared of all.”

Green eyes brightened unexpectedly as something occurred to Holly. “You act as though you are strange and crazy to keep them away, don’t you?” she realised suddenly, saying it out loud. “Oh, forgive me,” she apologised, understanding how bad that had sounded.

“I didn’t take offence.” The Ravenclaw smiled. “Well, some of it really is me, but I exaggerate it. My dad and I figured it would be for the best, but you saw through it so easily.”

“And you saw through me.”

The two lapsed into silence for a moment before Holly spoke again.

“I’ve been thinking,” she started, moving back to her bed. “I don’t know a great deal about Mind Magic nor do I have any friends that are telepaths, so I was hoping that you could help me with both problems.”

Blue eyes widened with shock, conspicuously bright. “I would love to.”

After dinner, Holly had another heart-to-heart chat, this one with Blaise in one of the study rooms. The two were leaning over a black book, studying one of the pages.

“So you wrote in it last night and discovered extra writing this morning after Defence?” Blaise questioned, turning the book about.

The girl responded, “Yes, but when I wrote in it, the ink soaked in and disappeared. It was like a sponge with water.”

“Strange.”

“I know,” she allowed, her eyes drifting to Blaise, who was now looking at her intently. “What is it?”

He sighed and ran a hand over his face. Unexpectedly, he placed the diary on a table and took both of Holly’s hands in his.

“I don’t want to push you, Holly, but I’m worried.”

She blankly blinked at him, completely frozen.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the Dursleys? About how the twins had to break into their house to free you?” He exhaled slowly, his grip almost painful in its intensity. “About the bars?”

She stiffened. “I... I... can’t. Not yet.”

Holly tried to pull away, but he held fast. The girl fought the urge to panic, calming after a moment.

“Just give me some time, Blaise,” she murmured, not meeting his eyes. “I will tell you. I meant to tell you, but I just couldn’t find the words.”

The boy squeezed her hands and leaned his forehead against hers, their noses almost touching. “Fine, I can wait, but I do worry about you, Hols. I hope you know that.” He sniffled, causing Holly to start when she realised that his eyes were red-rimmed.

“Blaise...” she began but trailed off, not entirely sure what to say. Holly was not used to having others care so much for her happiness.

He exhaled slowly. His breath tickled her nose, and she sneezed, easing the tension unintentionally.

“You’re my friend, and I care about you. You might not matter to them, but you matter to me.” He pulled back, impulsively pressing a kiss to her forehead. “*Te amo, amorcita*,” he whispered softly in what she knew was Spanish.

There was another far gentler squeeze, and her hands were released. They sat in silence for a few moments before Blaise spoke again.

“So what do you think?” He indicated the diary.

“Personally, I’m not sure. My senses tell me there’s something strange about it,” she took the abrupt change of subject with great aplomb, wiping her eyes discreetly. “Do you think that I should write something else?”

Blaise glanced at her and shook his head. “I believe we should wait. We could try looking up things in the library about it like we planned. Maybe try a few more spells.” He snapped the diary shut. “I want to be sure before we write in it again. We have no idea what... or who is writing back.”

Te amo, amorcita: I love you, little love.

AN: A big portion of the Lockhart scene is directly quoted, but it was so funny that I couldn’t change it. Almost all of the pansy’s dialogue comes straight from the book because I can’t write him. Most of the action in the scene is different; basically, I... er... “Slytherinised” things.

Also, I like Luna, so she gets to be a main character. Plus, she is just so much fun. She’s a bit like Dumbledore but flightier. Also, I gradually plan to include her more as the story progresses. She will have a part but not an especially large one until later on.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks

Chapter Fifteen: Secrets and Samhain

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Fifteen: Secrets and Samhain

Holly never thought she would ever find someone else with her abilities, not that she ever thought she would befriend someone as completely bizarre as Luna Lovegood. However, sure enough, she had done both. The two girls were fast friends, actually becoming close quicker than Holly and Blaise had. It wasn't an unusual sight to see the two eating meals together at the Slytherin table or in the library sitting with the Slytherin second-years or to see the blonde Ravenclaw in the Slytherin Common Room. In fact, the first-year was becoming quite a permanent fixture in Slytherin House, much like Gavin in that she practically lived with them, doing everything with them save sleeping in their dorm. Though Milli secretly had bet Theo that soon enough the girl would be living with them, too, just as Gavin was.

And it wasn't as though any of the second-years minded. Truth be told, they delighted in the fact that they had a new member of their group. Even more, they were happy that Holly was opening up to someone else and was coming out of the strange funk she had been in since the summer holidays. Blaise was virtually dancing on the spot with joy at his best friend's change in attitude, and he, too, was now quite fond of the unusual Ravenclaw. The others took it in stride, Milli beaming that she had another little one to "protect and nurture" as she put it. Even Draco wasn't bothered by Luna's presence. In fact, he actually seemed somewhat fascinated by her, as if he hadn't quite seen anything like her before.

However, while the friendship was very beneficial for both of the girls, it did have a number of consequences as well. For one, Holly never thought she would dislike anyone more than the Dursleys, but that was until she met Cassius Debello. The boy was insufferable, more so than even Draco the previous year. Not only did he harass Luna on a regular basis, but he took it upon himself to attempt to mistreat Holly as well. The key word, though, was **attempt**.

Everyone in their circle had taken an instant dislike of the errant third-year Ravenclaw and had closed ranks around Holly and their new friend. They had taken to loitering about Ravenclaw Tower the few times that Luna was actually there. Gavin was all but following her

around while they were inside since the older boy had complained about them to Professor Flitwick, and they weren't allowed inside as an entire group anymore.

However, unbeknownst to the prat, the Ravenclaw Head of House hadn't actually banned them; he had just suggested that they try not to all be there at once. In truth, he was happy that his odd little Eagle had found some friends, even if they weren't in his House. A few of the older students, namely Alé, Gavin, and the oldest members of the House had taken a shine to her, but for the most part, she was ignored, which was better than what the others in the House did to her.

Professor Flitwick had been furious, all but glowering in his anger, the first time Luna's year-mates had pranked her. And his frustration had only increased each time, especially after some of the second and third-year girls had also taken up the task of bullying her. He had actually been forced to take the ringleader, a pretty third-year named Cho Chang, aside to demand that they stop. Yet, no matter how many detentions he threatened to give, and actually had assigned, the pranks didn't stop. It seemed as though there was something about her that bothered most of the younger years, but for the life of him, Filius Flitwick could not figure out what.

Unfortunately, Ravenclaw was not the only House that Holly had trouble with. After she had learned about both of Ron and Neville's feelings towards her, the Slytherin had started to distance herself from them. However, apparently the adage "absence makes the heart grow fonder" was true in her case because the few times she was near them their thoughts only seemed to dwell on her even more than before. She all but avoided them entirely now, which had the unfortunate circumstance that she didn't get to see Hermione very much either since both boys were practically glued to her side most of the time. In fact, the only place Holly and the bushy-haired girl could ever interact freely was in the library.

Yet, here also there was another problem. It seemed like Hermione detested Luna.

Oh, the Gryffindor didn't insult her or even try to prank her; she was actually unfailingly polite to the younger girl. However, she would always stiffen when Luna was around, which was all the time, and would huff at anything the blonde said. Hermione couldn't stand the girl's dreamy nature and alternative way of looking at things. The brunette thrived on facts and logic and couldn't understand anyone that did not. Further, she made her opinions about Luna's state of mind known without ever having to say a word, not that she didn't remark upon the peculiar comments anyway.

As for Ginny Weasley and her partner in crime, Colin Creevey, the two had taken to stalking Holly around the school. The pair had gotten ahold of her schedule somehow, and now, they often met the Slytherin outside her classes. The boy joyfully snapped Holly's picture whenever he was around, receiving countless hexes from the other Slytherins, Milli and Theo in particular, for bugging her. He had been cursed so badly that he had been taken to the Hospital Wing no less than eight times in the last few weeks, oftentimes sprouting antlers from his nostrils, tentacles from his eyes, or both. Additionally, he had had the film ferociously ripped out of his camera several times by Holly's defenders, the poor device being irreparably damaged in the process, but to no avail. Colin kept coming back for more. He was quite the glutton for punishment.

And as for Ginny, nothing delighted her more than receiving a "Hello" no matter how tiredly or forcefully given from Holly, so she walked by the older girl at least ten times a day just to get one. It was only the Slytherin girl's continuing gratitude over the fact that Ginny had graciously shared her room during the summer that kept her from telling the redhead to bugger off. Well, that and the fact that she didn't want to make the twins mad as they were protective of their only sister.

It seemed as if the only people Holly knew in Gryffindor that weren't acting like imbeciles around her were in fact Fred, George, and Percy, which really didn't say much for the others. Percy was being his normal rule-abiding self, so he pompously remained neutral to everything. As for the twins, Fred and George treated her like they always had, like she was a perfectly normal person and not some famous star, and they took her friendship with Luna in stride, actually

taking to pranking both Cassius and the other Ravenclaws for her. They liked the blonde's unusual nature and her off-beat way of looking at things.

As Fred had put it to Holly, "We're not the most normal of people anyway, so who are we to judge."

Regrettably, Holly's people troubles were not limited to students either. Lockhart, the incredible imbecile that he was, had not improved in his teaching methods in the slightest. So the Slytherins, meeting one night to decide what to do about him, had thrown their collective hands up in defeat and had taken to learning Defence on their own. Holly had greatly advocated this plan, remembering that there was a good chance that Voldemort would be after her once again, and Blaise had quickly seconded her. Their year-mates along with Luna and Gavin now met every other weekday after dinner for an hour and for two hours before lunch on weekends to practice in one of the study rooms. Not surprisingly, they were learning far more on their own than they ever had with the dandy or Quirrell, for that matter. In fact, now that they had caught Luna up with them, they were advancing through the second-year material at an alarming rate and would be starting third-year some time before Christmas.

They each took turns leading their little Defence study group, one person learning several spells beforehand and showed them to everyone. Afterwards, they would pair off and practice on each other. For lessons that didn't involve spellcasting, such as learning to distinguish a Veela from a human, they would read about the subject, one of them again doing extra research to fill in the blanks. And over time Holly noticed a distinct pattern as to who led the group for which type of lesson. Blaise, Milli, and Theo seemed to mostly have sessions with spell-work, Milli apparently knowing more hexes, curses, and jinxes than most upper-years. On the other side, Gavin and Pansy taught things that didn't require a wand, while Holly, Draco, and Luna, of all people, did a fair mixture of both.

To this, Holly had noticed the somewhat disturbing trend where it seemed that out of all of them, she led most often. As for the remaining second-years, they simply had not taught enough to have

a preference as far as lessons went. Autumn and Greg hadn't even led the group yet.

There were two other semi-positive things to note about the days leading up to November. For one, there was Slytherin's first Quidditch match, which was against Gryffindor. Thankfully, their entire team had new broomsticks courtesy of several parents.

Additionally, while they hadn't made a good deal of progress on what the diary **was**, other than it seemed to have a mind of its own, they did know what it wasn't. Already, they had ruled out a Soul Reaper, an object of possession, and quite a number of other things. Holly hadn't written in it again, still not sure if it was safe, but she was bordering on throwing caution to the wind and doing it anyway.

After all, if they couldn't figure out what it was, why couldn't they just ask it?

The days passed quickly, and soon, it was Halloween. Holly sat down to breakfast that morning, feeling a bit depressed about the whole thing. She stared morosely at her bangers and eggs, not really all that hungry. The anniversary of her parents' deaths always bothered her, making her quiet and moody for days leading up to it. However, despite her apparent apathy, her attention was gradually drawn to the conversation around her.

"Nothing is going to stop us from having a proper Samhain this year," Theo intoned with a fierce gleam in his eyes, waving his fork about and causing Milli to duck out of the way.

Draco actually chuckled. "Yes, bad luck with the troll incident last year and Professor Snape cancelling our celebration. We didn't get to do any of the cool things." He smiled wistfully, his eyes glazing over. "There was no apple-docking, no bonfire dancing... not even a candle lighting!"

Holly blinked. "Er... are we going to do all of those things?"

"Oh, yes... that and more," Draco added, a look of delight on his face, but he suddenly glanced at her. "That's right. You wouldn't know, would you?"

She shook her head.

“You celebrated Halloween with the Muggles, right?” Draco asked thoughtlessly, belatedly noticing her face darken. “Well, it’s a bit like Halloween, but there are some differences,” he added gently. “It’s about honouring those who have passed beyond the Veil and about remembering them. In wizarding tradition, death isn’t to be feared but to be respected as a part of life.”

Gavin nodded, spearing an egg with his fork. “Yeah, it’s quite odd to actually find a follower of the Old Ways who is fearful of death since most believe in an after-life or reincarnation.” He shrugged, taking a bite. “But many of those beliefs have been fading in the last few centuries because of the increasing number of Muggleborns. Most of them don’t care to learn our traditions, so only the older families actually remember now.”

Milli wrapped an arm around Holly, hugging the girl to her side. “But thankfully, though Muggle-raised, Holly is not like that. She actually wants to learn about her heritage.”

“Oh, me, too,” Autumn put in, setting her glass down. “I want to learn, too. I find wizarding traditions to be far more interesting and relevant than most Muggle ones.”

Pansy beamed and patted her on the arm. “And it is so good to hear you say that, dear heart.”

The other girl preened, munching on her toast.

Holly merely cocked her head to the side. “So what else goes on for Samhain?”

“Well, it’s celebrated around the same time as the Muggle Halloween, as you have probably already guessed,” Draco replied after a moment. “And it has many of the same stories and ideas about spirits and whatnot.”

“Also, it’s at Samhain that those born in the past year are formally welcomed into the community,” Theo added his three Knuts in. “My

new cousin will be introduced this year, even though she was born last December.”

“Other than that,” Draco clarified, wiping his hands on his napkin, “it is very similar to Halloween, like I said. Actually, most of the ideas for that were stolen from us, like dressing up for it.”

“Yeah, but I thought that only Muggle children did,” Cynthia inserted. “Wizarding adults dress up, too. Still,” she admitted with a sigh, “I wish that we could do that at school, but it’d be too hard for everyone to find a costume. We’ll just have to wait until after we graduate.”

Luna stated dreamily, “And when we do, we mustn’t forget to wear mask to confuse the Wee Folke.” She leaned toward Holly, adding in a conspirator murmur, “They get can’t tell people apart then. That’s why they haven’t gotten my dad yet for telling the world about them in the *Quibbler*.”

“Right,” Theo stated without missing a beat, turning back to Holly. “Anyway, during Samhain – and Beltane, too – the Veil between life and death is lifted, so spirits can crossover and visit their loved ones. People light candles for those they’ve lost, carving their names on them. Sometimes, their spirits will visit as well,” he added as an afterthought.

Holly’s eyes widened. “Visit?”

Blaise and Draco exchanged a look.

And Gavin answered, “Most of the time it happens when the person sleeps that night, but I’ve heard that there are special ways to summon someone so you can talk to them directly.”

“You can actually talk to them?” Holly whispered, mind already whirling with ideas.

Blaise put his hand on her elbow. “You have to do a summoning ritual. I’m not sure we have enough magical control now, but we could try it on Beltane in the spring if you like,” he murmured in her ear, cutting the others out of the conversation. “My father’s library has a few books on it; we could look over Christmas.”

Holly nodded, too enraptured in the idea of actually speaking to her parents that she missed the oblique invitation Blaise had made concerning the holidays. The others exchanged looks, not knowing what the caramel-skinned boy had said to her.

“So what else happens?” Autumn prompted after a moment.

“Well, it’s a harvest celebration, too,” Daphne responded from the other side of the table, “so there’s food. We’ll mostly rely on the Halloween feast, but there’ll be snacks. We’ll have a few games like apple-bobbing. At midnight, a few of the older students do this trick with mirrors and apples, but not many people like that one since it’s difficult.”

“Don’t forget the bonfires,” Pansy put in quickly, turning to Autumn. “There’s going to be some in one of the study rooms.” Catching the other girl’s puzzled look, she explained, “Oh, it’s magically expanded to be quite large, and the fire is spelled so it won’t spread. You see, we dance around it in celebration. Oh, we’ll write our names on stones and throw them in. In the morning, we’ll come get them. The condition tells us how our year will go.”

“Does it work?” the redhead asked with interest, her breakfast completely forgotten.

Pansy shrugged. “Supposedly, but it depends on how good you are at interpreting it. Maybe we could get a few of the older students who take Divination to help us. I think that Solaris made an Exceeds Expectation on that OWL.”

“Why doesn’t the entire school do this?” the smallest Slytherin inquired suddenly, her attention having returned to the conversation. “I mean, it sounds brilliant, so wouldn’t everyone want to participate?”

“Originally, we did,” Draco answered. “But the school adapted for Muggleborns because they wouldn’t know the traditions. Not like they couldn’t learn like Autumn and you though,” he added in an undertone, obviously displeased about it. “So we don’t officially celebrate Samhain school-wide, but the Slytherins have always had their own private celebration anyway. It dates back to the days of the

Founders. Salazar's wife was Celtic, and Samhain was her favourite; we've always been big on it."

"We do things for Beltane and the others also," Milli added, cutting a sausage with her knife, "but Samhain is the biggest."

Holly strained her memory, trying to recall what she had done in the past that cause her to miss that celebration. Then, it hit her. That was when they thought that Voldemort would show up any day and try for the Stone. She would bet anyone ten Galleons that she had missed the party, and all the signs that it even existed, in the excitement.

Shaking her head, she rejoined the conversation. "So when does it start?"

"Tonight," Blaise informed her, "immediately after the feast. That is if Professor Snape doesn't cancel it again."

The Halloween feast was exciting, a bit better than the one the year before. However, Holly couldn't seem to get into the spirit of things. She ate and chatted with her friends, but her mind kept drifting to the celebration that was to take place later... and the chance that she could communicate with her parents.

Halfway through the evening, Holly and Luna set aside their plates and rose. The first-year was celebrating Samhain with them and would be spending the night, so they needed to fetch her things from Ravenclaw tower.

And a few seconds afterwards, both Blaise and Draco rose, too.

"Remember what happened last year?" Blaise asked at Holly's inquiring expression. "We should go as a group just in case." The other second-years made to rise as well, but he waved them off. "We don't all have to go. Stay and enjoy the feast. We'll meet you back in the Common Room."

With that, the four left the Great Hall, heading up the stairs and toward the library. Luna turned down a side hall, moving to stand in front of a statue of a scholarly but befuddled wizard with opened book

in hand. She loudly answered the riddle to open the portrait and sauntered in, the Slytherins hot on her heels. The second-years glanced around since they had only been in the Tower a few times before, noting that it was an oval room with domed ceilings and very large windows that showed a clear view of the lake. It was decorated along similar lines to its Slytherin equivalent but was in blue and bronze instead, not to mention a few more bookcases.

Luna led the boys over to the empty sofa in front of the fireplace. "You'll have to wait here. Boys can't climb the stairs to the girl's dorm."

With a faraway smile, she took Holly's hand and led her up the marble staircase. Where the stairs split with, Luna took the left, leading the older girl to the first door at the top. The blonde quickly fetched a pre-packed bag, throwing in only one or two new additions.

Meanwhile, Holly looked about, searching for one thing in particular. "Luna, do you have toilets in each room?" she inquired.

Luna answered without even looking up, "I wouldn't recommend going in ours. The other girls are very messy. Besides, they rig pranks to go off on me. They'd probably get you by mistake."

Holly sighed heavily. She really had to go, but she would just have to hold it.

Within a minute, they were thankfully back in the Common Room, and within two more, the four of them were out the entrance. They travelled down the corridor, taking a different route than their original one. Passing by a short side hallway, Holly came to a stop, the others pausing as well.

"Sorry, but I'll be back in a minute," she informed them, fighting the urge to fidget.

Luna looked at her knowingly, eyes travelling to the girl's loo just down the corridor.

Blaise and Draco glanced at each other.

"We can wait outside," the brunet responded.

"No, go on," the Ravenclaw replied, carefully avoiding the various puddles on the floor and leading Holly to the door. "It wouldn't do to be seen loitering about. Besides," she whispered, "this is Myrtle's bathroom; she might get jealous."

And with that, the two girls opened the door and were inside.

The boys exchanged another look.

"Well, I guess we could start on the way back," Draco called out. "We'll just walk slowly."

Inside, Holly heard a great deal of wailing, and she growled slightly as Moaning Myrtle was obviously in. She avoided another enormous puddle and entered through the closest door, the one furthest from the spectre. Luna decided to go into the one next to her. Hopefully, the ghost wouldn't even notice they were there.

Holly felt bad for not trying to comfort her, but with the mental waves she was currently receiving, the Slytherin knew it would be all but impossible to calm the ghost. The girl heaved a sigh of relief as the pressure on her bladder eased. Belatedly, she felt a tingle at the back of her mind, the feeling of another familiar person. She heard a scraping sound and thought she heard the sound of the toilet door opening.

"Luna?" she questioned, looking under the side and seeing the other girl's feet.

"Not me," the blonde sing-songed. "Maybe it's Myrtle, or it could be the boys."

The Slytherin reached out her senses again. She felt that the ghost was still in her stall and noted that the boys were moving slowly away, beyond the corner of the corridor. Additionally, there was a strange and very familiar, but totally unrecognisable, presence just outside of the girl's toilet. She also faintly felt what seemed to be Mrs. Norris coming down the hall towards them.

"No, not them," she finally replied with a shrug, letting the subject drop as she felt the person start to move away a few moments later. "There must have been someone else in here. You know, I really need to work on my abilities," she whispered, after she mentally checked for others and noticed that Myrtle was still far too loud and upset to even hear them. "People keep sneaking up on me."

"I think that my mum had a book on that at home," Luna replied, fiddling with her hair and not actually using the toilet, even if she was in the stall. "I'll owl dad about it."

A few minutes later, Holly walked over to the sinks. She tried a tap, but the water refused to come out, making her move to another. Finished washing her hands and with guilt filling her, the girl slowly approached the ghost's door.

"Myrtle. Myrtle," she called out, but when she received only louder wails in response, she backed away. The Slytherin shook her head, projecting a few soothing thoughts to the spectre; she turned to the other girl and inclined her head to the door.

"Ready?" she asked Luna.

The Ravenclaw headed for the door without giving a response. The two were just exiting, the older girl dodging yet another puddle, when Holly spotted something strange on the near wall. Her hand flew to the arm of the younger girl.

"Look," she stated, pointing with her free hand.

There was a message on the wall, the lights flickering over it and casting strange shadows on the red writing.

The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Enemies of the Heir, beware.

Gazing up at the message on the wall, Holly noticed something hanging from the torch out of the corner of her eye. Her attention instantly flickered to it, and Holly did what any sensible person would have done in the same situation.

She screamed.

It wasn't a very loud one but was still enough to echo down the hallway. It immediately stopped the two boys in their tracks and sent them racing back to the bathroom.

"What is it?" Blaise gasped as he came up to them, not nearly as winded as he was on his mad dash session the previous spring.

The pair simply pointed.

"Merlin's staff!" Draco yelled in a strangely high-pitched voice, pulling both girls back. "It's Mrs. Norris... and I think that she might just be dead!" he added, taking in the stiff appearance of the cat.

In the distance, they could hear the rumble of many students exiting the Great Hall, the feast apparently over.

"I believe that you're correct," Holly murmured, bravely stepping forward to study the poor animal.

Just then they heard other footsteps coming up the corridor. Apparently, someone else had also heard the scream.

"What's going on here? What's going on?" Argus Filch demanded, appearing around the corner.

The thunder of the students was growing closer, seeming as though they were right on the caretaker's heels.

Filch came straight up to them before his eyes flickered up. He gaped in horror.

"My cat! My cat!"

Students began filling the corridor, attracted by the sound of Filch's yelling.

"You!" The man pointed at Holly, who was standing closest to Mrs. Norris. "You've murdered my cat! You've killed her! I'll kill you! I'll--"

“Argus!” Dumbledore shouted, arriving on the scene and inserting himself between Holly and the caretaker.

A number of teachers moved to the edges of the ever-growing crowd of onlookers, and apparently, satisfied that Filch wouldn't attempt to attack Holly again, the headmaster removed Mrs. Norris from the torch.

“Come with me, Argus.” He glanced at the four students. “You, too, Miss Potter, Mr. Zabini, Miss Lovegood, Mr. Malfoy.”

It was at that moment that the dandy himself spoke up, offering his office as it was the closest. Rather reluctantly, Dumbledore nodded, and the group along with Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Snape walked to the berk's office.

Inside, the people in the pictures dashed out of the way, obviously not expecting company since several of them were wearing rollers and hairnets. The headmaster placed the cat on Lockhart's desk, studying her intently for several moments, his long nose so close to her as to be almost touching. He began to whisper strange words under his breath, the students attempting to listen in. McGonagall and Professor Flitwick likewise studied the animal. Professor Snape, in turn, lurked behind them, his lips twitching as he fought the urge to snicker. Filch collapsed into the dandy's chair, shuddering with sobs as Lockhart made useless suggestions about how the cat had died.

In that moment, Holly couldn't help but feel bad for the man, even if he had tried to attack her. She reached out to his mind and attempted to send soothing thoughts, though she wasn't sure how successful she was in the endeavour. Still, his sobs came to a halt, and he merely settled for sniffing.

The girl's eyes drifted to the short Charms professor, who noticed her gaze and gave her a reassuring smile. He silently moved over to stand near them and was about to speak when he was interrupted by Dumbledore.

“She's not dead, Argus.” Finally, the headmaster straightened.

Lockhart froze in the middle of one of his useless stories, and McGonagall smirked at him. Professor Snape's lips twitched.

"Not dead? But why's she all... all stiff and frozen?" Filch asked weakly.

"She has been Petrified," the headmaster announced, sending a reprimanding glare at the dandy when the man stated that he had known all along. "But how, I cannot say--"

"Ask her!" the caretaker yelled, pointing at Holly.

Green eyes widened, but Professor Dumbledore quickly came in for the save.

"No second-year could have done this. It would take magic of the most advanced--"

"She did it; she did it! You saw what she wrote on the wall! Somehow, she and her bigoted Snake friends found out about me. She knows I'm a... I'm a..." Filch faltered. "She knows I'm a Squib!"

And suddenly, it all made sense in Holly's mind. She and the others had suspected that Filch was all but magic-less. It definitely explained his behaviour toward the students, but they hadn't had it confirmed until now. Filch, the bane of Hogwarts students for decades and all-around mean-hearted man, was jealous of the very people he mistreated.

While part of the girl's heart swelled with sadness for him as she knew what it was like to be the outsider, to be unable to be like everyone else, another part of it twinged with anger at him. It was not the students' fault that they had usable magic and he did not. He shouldn't act Dursley-like because of an accident of birth.

Holly turned to Filch. "I never touched Mrs. Norris," she responded softly, knowing that anger would not serve her purpose. "Luna and I found her after we left the toilet."

The blonde Ravenclaw nodded, her blue eyes very wide. "She wasn't there when we went in," Luna stated, for once sounding somewhat down-to-earth. "I'm not sure what happened though."

Draco took his cue. "We didn't see anything either." He indicated Blaise and himself.

Filch looked a bit put out; he was about to make what was undoubtedly a rude comment when the Potions master spoke up.

"If I might speak, Headmaster."

The rigidness of the four students' posture eased. Professor Snape would defend them from the obviously false accusations. He was an intelligent man and could instantly see that they had nothing to do with it. Plus, he was still bristling from Filch's insinuation about Slytherin House. The Potions master might not like Holly personally, but she was one of his Serpents. As he had proven the year before, he would do everything in his power to protect her from those who would try to harm her, especially if they were attempting to use her House against her.

"While things may seem suspicious, Miss Potter and her friends may have simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time," he put in smoothly.

Draco nodded fiercely, showing his complete agreement with the statement.

McGonagall growled, "Yes, things are quite suspicious. Why were they in the upstairs corridor at all? Why weren't they at the Halloween feast?" She shot them a disapproving glare.

McGonagall had never forgiven Holly for being a Slytherin, especially not since Holly's parents had been favourites of hers. In all reality, the Transfiguration teacher had adored James Potter, even as she bemoaned his mischief, due in no small part to his love and natural talent for her subject. Professor Flitwick had even informed Holly that McGonagall had offered an apprenticeship to her father right after he had graduated, but that James had been forced to turn it down when the war with Voldemort heated up and he joined the Aurors.

“Oh, I can answer that, Minerva,” Professor Flitwick put in, finally speaking. “Luna is spending the night in the Slytherin dorms. I assume you were on your way back from fetching her things,” he said, indicating the bag on his Ravenclaw’s shoulder.

“Yes, sir,” Holly responded. She heaved a mental sigh of relief, silently thanking the foresight to ask the Charms teacher for permission for Luna to stay with them.

“And why were the boys there then?” McGonagall tried again. “Obviously, they would have seen something happening outside of the loo if they were waiting for you.”

Blaise raised his head, looking her straight in the eye. “We offered to wait, but they told us to go on. They thought that Myrtle would take exception to boys loitering near her toilet.”

The deputy headmistress huffed, clearly not believing them for a minute. Once more, Professor Snape’s lips trembled as he fought a smile.

“I suggest, Albus, that Potter is not being entirely truthful.” The Transfiguration teacher’s eyebrow twitched. “Perhaps certain privileges should be removed as an enticement for her to tell us the true story.”

The Potions master was about to retort, but the shortest professor beat him to it.

“Honestly, Minerva,” he chastised. “I see no reason to punish her, to stop her from playing Quidditch – as I suspect you want to do. This cat wasn’t hit over the head with a broomstick. There is no evidence that they did anything wrong, and you shouldn’t automatically blame her for not being in your House.” He smiled widely then. “In fact, we should thank the children for attempting to help us sort it all out.”

“Indeed,” Professor Snape responded quickly. “Thirty points to Slytherin...” He paused before adding in a slightly sulky voice, “And ten to Ravenclaw.” He eyed them for a moment, noticing Draco and Blaise shift uneasily and realising instantly what the problem was.

“Yes, Mr. Zabini, Mr. Malfoy, the Samhain celebration will continue regardless of tonight’s **unfortunate** incident.”

The two Slytherins beamed at their Head of House.

Professor Dumbledore smiled faintly at the exchange, now staring directly into Holly’s eyes. She felt a slight pressure on her surface thoughts, and the Slytherin fought the urge to shield from the intrusion, knowing that it was the headmaster and that he was searching for the truth. However, she did protect the deeper portions of her mind, not wanting him to glimpse any secrets.

Finally, the elderly man announced, “Innocent until proven guilty, my friends.”

McGonagall and Filch looked murderous.

Within seconds the caretaker was demanding that someone be punished, while Dumbledore assured him that they would cure Mrs. Norris with Professor Sprout’s Mandrakes. It was at that point that the situation further deteriorated as Lockhart offered to make the potion with an angry Professor Snape interrupting him.

Finally, just as McGonagall was about to jump into the fray, the Charms professor led the four students out of the classroom.

“You may go on, children. Just be careful and don’t run into anything else.” He winked at Holly, and they turned to go.

Nonetheless, just as they started walking, Professor Flitwick called out, “I’ll be seeing you tomorrow afternoon at our usual time, Miss Potter.”

She gazed at him for a moment before nodding firmly. Holly gave him a smile and a small wave before heading down the corridor.

The trip to the Common Room was a quick one, the four discussing what had just occurred and coming up with no plausible explanations. They did, however, shift uncomfortably at the mention of the message on the wall and the words: “Chamber of Secrets.”

They rounded the corner and sauntered over to the entrance just as something occurred to the caramel-skinned boy. "Holly, have you ever noticed that bad things tend to happen to you on Halloween just after you go to the loo?" Blaise asked sardonically, coming up to the portrait. "The Crone and her Consort," he announced to it, stepping back as the picture swung open.

She grimaced. "I'm noticing that it has become something of a pattern. Hopefully, it won't happen again next year," she responded as they entered the Common Room.

There, the two girls veered off, heading up the hallway to Holly's room. The green-eyed girl spared a glance for her favourite portrait, noting the unicorns grazing, as they headed up the corridor. The two dropped off Luna's belongings in Holly's dorm.

An extra bed had been added in the corner of the wall opposite her reading space. Further, the wall looked as though it had been moved back, and the entire side had been magically expanded to fit the bed, which had the headboard in the corner. The Slytherin wasn't sure who had done it as she had only told one of the Prefects that Luna would be staying, and they had informed her that it would be taken care of.

Shrugging at each other, the two returned to the Common Room, met up with Blaise and Draco, and took the door that led to the study hallway. This was the area that the Samhain celebration would take place.

The party itself was fascinating, magical, and much more interesting than the Halloween feast. It was everything the others had described and more. The tables and chairs in each of the rooms had been pushed back, much like how it was during her birthday party, and each was now held with various activities.

One room was filled with apple-bobbing and several other games, and Holly laughed as she met up with a thoroughly soaked Theo and an even wetter Milli. Another area was officially a snack room, and Greg and Vincent could be seen sitting at one of the tables, stuffing themselves. Another room had been changed entirely and was

spelled to seem like a field, complete with magical bonfires, which most of the upper-years seemed to delight in dancing around.

Holly and Blaise took their own turn around one before she walked over to another fire. There was no dancing here, instead the participants seemed to be scribbling their names on what appeared to be rocks and tossing them in the flames. Holly actually took a turn herself at Titania Shacklebolt's insistence.

Afterwards, a now tired Holly, an incredibly sleepy Luna, and a silent Blaise travelled to the area at the very end of the hall. It was quiet inside, unlike the other rooms, and was darkened save for the light of the countless candles that dotted the various surfaces. All three picked up unlit tapers from the table by the door along with dull knives.

While the greatest majority of the candles were pure white, Holly chose to select among the coloured ones, taking a soft green for her mother and a deep red for her father. She gently carved their names on their respective tapers and placed them on a free surface in between the light purple Luna had chosen for her mum and the rich orange and blue Blaise had picked for his birth father and his sisters'.

Reaching for her wand, Holly whispered the incantation, lighting both.

"Mum, dad," she murmured, fingering her locket. "I hope that wherever you are, you're together and that you're happy. Please know that I miss you so very much." She sniffled, feeling Luna's grief and Blaise's sad acceptance coming off of them in waves. "I love you."

The two stood for several moments, staring at the flames. Blaise wrapped his arm around Holly's shoulders and gave a whispered, "Goodnight" before quietly leaving. The girls only remained for a few more minutes. They returned to Holly's room, quickly preparing for bed and crawling between the sheets. The Slytherin was asleep within moments of her head touching her pillow.

That night, Holly dreamed.

She was in an unfamiliar but welcoming kitchen, sitting down to dinner with her parents, basking in their company. They talked of

mundane things like school, Holly's classes, and her friends. The meal ended, but they remained seated, not willing to give up the moment.

Rather unexpectedly, both adults rose, moving to kneel on either side of Holly's chair. They smiled up at her; Lily's hand was on her cheek, James squeezing the child's small palm in his.

"I love you, my little one," Lily Potter whispered to her daughter, tears clinging to her eyelashes. "And I'm so sorry we had to leave you, but know this... we will always watch over you. We will always love you no matter what." She gently ran her hand across her daughter's skin.

James nodded. "We're so very proud, Holly, so very proud – especially since you're on the Quidditch team and a Seeker no less... **Oomph.**" He rubbed his stomach with his free hand, soothing the area where Lily's elbow had connected. "And as for being a Slytherin, be the best damned one you can be. We love you regardless of House. Besides, green is a good colour for you; it brings out your eyes."

Lily smiled at the comment, gazing at her husband with pride. "No matter what anyone says in the future, just know that we don't care about Houses. Slytherin isn't evil, and we aren't disappointed. It's where you are meant to be." She hesitated before continuing softly, "Horrible things are in the works at Hogwarts, love, but trust in your friends; they won't lead you astray. They'll stand by you, and you can trust in Albus Dumbledore. He really is trying to help you, but he's human, too. He does make mistakes."

"You can do it, fawn," James put in tenderly. "You can stand up for what's right and fulfil your destiny."

Holly nodded slowly, quite uncertain by what he meant. Belatedly, she noticed that the details of her surroundings were starting to become blurry, and she realised that their time was almost over.

James Potter used his daughter's distraction to exchange a silent look with his wife before leaning forward to whisper in Holly's ear. "It's not your fight alone; you'll have allies. The most important one is **right in your hands**. Just talk to him, befriend him. He, too, has

made mistakes, but he was young. The fault was not entirely or even mostly his. **Everything is not as it appears,**" he murmured intently, as if trying to burn his words into her brain. "He's far more important to you than you know. Your destiny and his are tied together; you just have to realise it."

The dream continued to haze, the Potters now the only clear things. And too soon, they became blurry also.

"And remember, dearest heart," Lily whispered as the dream faded, and Holly's mind drifted into a true slumber. "Remember that we love you always. We'll be watching."

In her bed, little Holly Potter sighed happily and rolled over. She smiled in her sleep, a single tear rolling down her cheek.

AN: I know McGonagall seems a bit OOC in this chapter, but I don't think she is. For one, Holly is a Slytherin, and for all Minerva's strictness, she is still biased against them. Second, McGonagall is still reeling from the fact that both of Holly's parents were Gryffindors and that she, the bloody Girl-Who-Lived, is in the Serpent House. We will see more of McGonagall's "anti-Hollyness" in the next few chapters, especially with the Heir of Slytherin stuff that will soon come into play.

Also, if you are wondering where I got the info on Samhain, I mixed and matched from several websites and from what I already knew about the holiday.

Just a note: a lot of the teacher's dialogue in the chapter comes directly from J.K., though some of it was moved around. For scenes like this, I keep the adults' dialogue similar/bordering on the same and change what the students say since, oftentimes, they are entirely different children.

Oh, important thing to remember. The fact that Holly didn't hear any serpent "whispering" is a very vital clue.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks

Chapter Sixteen: Written in Stone

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Sixteen: Written in Stone

Holly woke with a smile the next morning, a contented and slightly bitter-sweet smile. She had talked with her parents; she had actually talked with them, though they were dead, but they'd crossed from beyond to see her. They had come back from death itself just to see her, speak with her. And Holly would treasure that for the rest of her life.

With a satisfied sigh, she rose from her bed, noticing that she was the first awake as always. It had developed into a habit during her childhood since she had to be up early enough to make breakfast for the Dursleys. Now, it had the added advantage of letting her dress while everyone else was asleep. It wasn't that she was nervous about dressing in front of them per se; it was more like she didn't want them to get a good look at the strange marks that covered her: gifts from Vernon, Dudley and his gang, and even a few from Petunia. While they weren't many, they were still noticeable and would lead to awkward questions, ones she wasn't yet comfortable with answering.

After she had showered and pulled on her robe, she walked over to the side of the room and gently nudged Luna awake. The look of pure joy on the Ravenclaw's face as she opened her eyes was more than enough to indicate that she, too, had spoken with her dead mother. The two girls exchanged brief "good mornings" before the younger washed and dressed, while Holly put up her hair and organised her school bag.

Afterwards, they quietly headed out of the room and down the hallway to the connecting corridor. They turned to the study hall and entered the room that had hosted the bonfires from the previous night. It was still spelled to appear as though they had stepped outside, but now, it reflected the daylight, complete with big puffy clouds in the charmed sky. The two girls headed to one of the now ash-filled fire pits, removing the stones they had named and thrown in the previous night. Holly planned to have Solaris, the sixth-year Prefect, look over hers sometime during the next few days.

Luna and she headed for the Great Hall and sat down at the Slytherin table, only to notice that they were the only students there. However,

soon enough, others slowly began to trickle in. Theo was the first quickly followed by Gavin and Milli with Blaise drifting in a few moments later.

Holly smiled and waved her best friend over to the seat she had saved him, which he gratefully took. She turned back to her breakfast, but a voice in her ear stopped her.

"Did you see them?" Blaise asked so softly that the others couldn't even tell he was speaking.

She murmured back, "It was wonderful." Her eyes drifted to Daphne, who was looking at them with interest as she sat down. "I'll tell you about it later. Did you dream about--"

The caramel-skinned boy nodded hastily before she even complete the question. They quietly returned to their meal, only to be interrupted when Theo spoke up.

"So," he whispered, leaning in, "what went on last night? With Myrtle's toilet and the writing on the wall?"

The other second-years, who were now all present, also leaned forward.

"Well," Draco stated, setting his fork down. "We were coming back from Ravenclaw Tower. Holly stopped off to go to the toilet, and Blaise and I went on to the Common Room." At Milli's somewhat angry expression, he hurriedly put in, "They told us to go on. Myrtle doesn't like loiterers."

"Still, you shouldn't have left them. The entire reason you went was to keep something like this from happening," the heavy-set girl put in, her dark-green eyes blazing. She gave him a glare worthy of the Potions master.

Draco twitched slightly, but Blaise answered for him.

"Yes, we know that, and we're very sorry," he added, addressing the last part to Holly and Luna.

The Ravenclaw gave him a dreamy smile. "Oh, that's fine. It was probably for the best anyway, or you would have been attacked as well," she replied, showing that she actually had some sense.

Draco blinked, as did everyone else. "I hadn't thought of that," he murmured to himself.

"Anyway," Gavin interrupted a moment later, "what happened after that?" the dark-skinned boy questioned; his nose crinkled in anticipation, which only served to emphasise his light smattering of freckles.

Holly exchanged a glance with Luna. "I thought I heard someone – well, someone other than Myrtle, who was crying in the last toilet. It was rather strange, but they left before I exited my stall." She intentionally failed to mention that she had sensed the other person as the others did not yet know of her abilities.

The first-year nodded. "I heard them, too," she added in, tucking her wand behind her ear. "But we can't be sure who it was because we didn't immediately leave; we tried to talk to poor Myrtle, but she wouldn't have anything to do with us. Probably upset about Peeves or another student."

Holly thought it over. "When we did leave, it was only to find the writing and Mrs. Norris, and then... well, I screamed..." She paused as Milli reached across the table to pat her hand comfortingly.

To her relief, none of her friends laughed.

"Can't really blame you for that one, mate," Theo commented, running a hand through his dark hair. "I probably would have, too, and that wouldn't have been a pretty sight," he went on, winking mischievously. "So what next?"

Holly flashed him a grin and quickly filled in the rest of the details with occasional helpful additions by Luna, Blaise, and Draco. The others all nodded at the appropriate parts, scowled when McGonagall tried to punish her, Milli and Theo actually growling then. Everyone smirked at Lockhart's antics and finally sighed with relief when Professors Snape and Flitwick rose to defend them.

“Interesting,” Cynthia stated after Holly had finished her narrative. “So what’d think of the message?”

Gavin’s eyebrows scrunched in concentration, and he looked to Theo. “The Chamber of Secrets,” he proclaimed, the other boy nodding in agreement.

Pansy perked up. “Really? It did say that ‘*the Chamber has been opened,*’” she added in, absentmindedly tucking back a lock of blonde hair.

“But what’s this Chamber of Secrets? I’ve never heard of it before,” Autumn cut in.

The others shifted uncomfortably at the Muggleborn’s question.

“Well?” she asked again.

Finally, Theo answered, “According to legend, it was a secret place created by Salazar Slytherin. He supposedly stored books, artefacts, and various other magics there.”

Autumn looked at them with confusion. “Well, that doesn’t sound so bad.”

Milli gave her a small, grim smile. “Yes, but there are rumours that there were other, more deadly things stored there,” she answered, thinking back to Hogwarts: A History.

“What do you mean ‘deadly things?’” the Muggleborn girl whispered softly, eyes very wide.

Draco sighed, taking his cue. “It’s also said that Salazar hated Muggleborns and Muggles, which you undoubtedly know.” He paused as the redhead nodded. “There is no way to confirm that though, but supposedly, he placed a monster in the Chamber that would rid the school of all those he felt unworthy to learn magic.” He exhaled and ran a hand through his hair. “His own true heir will be the only one capable of controlling the beast, and he or she will ‘unleash the horror within.’”

“Against those of Muggle heritage or blood,” Holly concluded softly, repressing a shiver.

Autumn gaped. “But that makes no sense!” she announced, looking back and forth at them. “Why would he do that? There are Muggleborns in his House! I’m one of them!”

Pansy shrugged. “I don’t know, but that is what everyone says. It’s complete rubbish, in my opinion,” she stated loftily, sipping her morning tea. “I think that it was just a rumour started to make us look bad.”

The others nodded their fierce agreement.

“I agree,” Gavin put in, finishing his toast. “It’s simply not logical. I mean, I can understand why he might be a bit mistrustful of them given the situation at the time.”

“Situation?” Autumn interrupted, glancing around when they hesitated.

Gavin exhaled very slowly. “At the time, Muggles greatly feared magic, and it wasn’t uncommon for them to attack and kill magical beings. Even with our abilities, we’re still mortal; we still have vulnerabilities.” He shook his head sadly, wiping his face with his napkin. “Anyway, Muggleborns were known for repressing their magic, not wanting to admit that they were involved with ‘devilry’ – as it was called.”

Theo added in, “The few Muggleborns who admitted they had magic were often conflicted about it. Their doctrines taught them that it was evil, so they thought they were. Also, their families would often turn against them.” He made a slashing gesture with his hands, Autumn almost jumping back in shock.

“It wasn’t unheard of for them to turn against their magical brethren,” Daphne said softly, “forsaking their own nature. They would ‘repent’ – as they called it – and would tell the Muggles where our communities were located.”

Holly could barely conceal the shiver that ran down her spine.

Milli stated, trying to keep her voice as neutral as possible, "They'd then gather in large groups and attack us. That's why there are now so many wards on magical buildings and in enchanted areas, to keep them away or from even discovering us. That's why we pulled out from their world." She gently patted the Muggleborn girl, who was near tears by this point, and then began to rub her back. "They feared what they didn't understand."

The smallest Slytherin shuddered, thinking of the Dursleys.

"Even then, it was not always like that," Blaise said, discreetly took Holly's hand underneath the table. "Once, magic was revered. Muggle and magical alike lived in harmony. We were friends and neighbours. Family. However, the Old Ways were lost as new religions began to sweep through the area... and the world." He gently squeezed his friend's hand, interlacing their fingers. "These beliefs took hold in the Muggles; for some strange reason, the ideas appealed to them. Well," he corrected himself, "it was more like they were forced to convert or die, have their whole families wiped out" He exhaled thoughtfully, running his thumb over Holly's palm. "Later on, the beliefs took root in their children, who never had the chance to know there was another way."

Luna quietly took Holly's other hand. "We didn't escape without changes either," she murmured, for once sounding serious. "The seeds of dissention were sown in our ranks as well and not just against Muggles. At this point, we also started distrusting non-humans... in addition to those with the more unusual magical gifts, like Sight or telepathy."

Both her friends squeezed Holly's hands fiercely. Across from her, Draco's eyes glinted strangely.

"We, too, began to fear," Luna continued. "We feared that we would be betrayed by others who weren't exactly like us, by those who were different." The Ravenclaw tilted her head, looking at the cloudy ceiling, lost in thought.

The entire group lapsed into stunned silence. Autumn sniffled, and Pansy rubbed her back soothingly, taking Milli's place. Blaise and Draco exchanged dark looks, the blond trembling slightly. Milli quietly

finished her breakfast, while Gavin and Theo eyed their half-eaten food. Cynthia and Daphne, who had both been rather quiet this morning, stonily stared at the far wall. Even Greg and Vincent, who were normally silent anyway, seemed to be all but soundless.

Several moments passed in brooding quiet before Autumn finally spoke again.

“What else do they say about the Chamber?” She sniffled once more and gladly took the embroidered handkerchief Theo offered her.

Blaise blinked and quickly ducked under the table bent to retrieve his bag, instantly reappearing with a book in hand. He found the index before flipping to a particular page, his eyes scanning it.

Looking up, he stated, “Nothing much. It basically says the same thing we told you. Though, of course, it leaves out the parts about Muggles hating magic during Salazar’s lifetime.”

Holly casually looked over his shoulder. “Yes, hm... maybe we could ask one of the older students about it.” She considered “What about Titus; he’s always a great help with our History homework. He would most certainly help us.”

“No good,” Daphne replied. “I overheard Livy talking with Flint about it this morning. He doesn’t really know that much about it either. Apparently, there isn’t a great deal of literature covering it.”

The others looked stumped.

“Well,” Holly put in after a heartbeat, “we could always go to the source then.” She exchanged a grin with Blaise.

“I don’t--” Draco began before it dawned on him. “No, not Binns!”

“Yes, Binns! If anyone knows, it will be him. We can ask him tomorrow during class,” Blaise responded, glancing at his watch. “That is if we can get him to stop talking about the Goblin Wars for more than five minutes.

The rest of the meal passed quickly, Draco looking thoroughly unhappy, and soon, the Slytherins were heading for Defence. Unfortunately, the class couldn't pass fast enough. The dandy spent the entire time blathering on about how he was already working on the mystery of Mrs. Norris and that it would undoubtedly be solved within days.

Holly simply rolled eyes; her tolerance for the dandy and his gimmicks was reaching the breaking point.

"Something needs to be done about him," the tiny girl whispered to Draco as she lovingly fingered her wand, which was still in her holster.

They idly watched as Lockhart forced a blank-faced Theo to act out a scene from one of his books, playing a surprisingly convincing werewolf.

Draco nodded resolutely. "And soon."

Thankfully, the bell finally rang, and the Slytherins were released from their personal hell. Holly, Draco, and Blaise headed down the hallway towards Transfiguration, trailing between their year-mates. The two boys were just a few steps ahead of her, deeply involved in a conversation about how it was impossible to kill a kappa with seawater and a toothpick like Lockhart had pompously claimed after Theo had questioned a vague sentence in one of his books. Draco insisted that they sometimes lived in the ocean, so they would have to be tolerant of saltwater.

The girl, however, was hanging back, lost in thought about the message on the wall. Her eyes momentarily looked up as they passed by a connecting corridor, and she noticed Justin Finch-Fletchley, a Hufflepuff she sat near in Charms. Holly smiled and was about to say hello, when the boy spotted her, instantly turning around and fleeing back down the hallway.

Blinking as she watched him, the Slytherin felt a chill shoot down her spine. With a sigh, she moved to follow Blaise and Draco, only come face to face with the former. Shocked green eyes peered up at him as he gently took her by the arm and led her down the hall, Draco taking her other arm.

“Just ignore the fool, Holly,” the older boy stated, trying to keep his anger in check. “Just ignore him,” Blaise repeated emphatically. He had an idea why Justin had run, and he didn’t like it. The Hufflepuff hadn’t turned tail until he saw Holly, not when he saw the two boys... but Holly.

The lone girl nodded slowly, picking up on his concealed emotions.

Draco patted her shoulder. “Yes, right. You have better things to think about, like the quiz McGonagall will surely give us. That old bat is just mean enough to do it, too.”

Holly sighed but remained silent. Her mind still playing over the feeling of sudden fright Justin had experienced as soon as he had seen her.

McGonagall, who was in a shirty mood due undoubtedly to the night before, did in fact give them a surprise quiz, and Holly felt no small amount of smug satisfaction when she aced it. The rest of the day flew by for her, punctuated by strange whispers whenever she passed by, a meeting with Professor Flitwick after dinner, where the professor didn’t even mention the incident of the toilet, and the interpretation of her stone from the fire.

Solaris, the sixth-year Prefect, was nice enough to look it over for her. However, minutes soon passed, his brow furrowed in thought as he scribbled various notes on a loose piece of parchment. Finally, after almost an hour, in which the teenager refused to give up in face of the fascinating challenge, he finally looked at her.

“Well,” he stated, rubbing a crick out of his neck. “I must say that your year will be... **interesting**, if not a bit convoluted.”

She gazed at him, filling with dread, “And?”

The upper-year eyed her tiredly. “Interesting, very interesting. There’s a great friend and ally in your future... well, several actually, but one will stand out above the others. You have already met them or will very soon, and they’ll mean a great deal to you as time passes; they’ll stand by you when you need it the most. And, believe me, you will definitely need it.” He sighed then. “I’m going to be honest with you,

Holly, but there's no easy way to say this." The Prefect leaned back in his seat, carefully studying her expression.

"You'll be in great danger." He corrected himself, "Scratch that... you're **already** in danger. You have an enemy watching from the shadows, but there's also a threat closer to home." He paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts and letting his statement sink in.

For a second, his face clouded over. "Yellow eyes of death. Dark creatures, forgotten memories, lost truth. Your future's grim, Holly. Maker... your stone shows a Grim," he murmured more to himself than to her, but in an instant, he was back to himself.

The Prefect quickly went on as if nothing had happened. "However, that's not all. Friends will become enemies, and enemies will be friends. Those you consider allies will turn on you; they'll distrust you, believe that you're the danger. Others will see you as a threat." He gazed at her sadly.

"On the other hand, you'll see evidence against other people you view as your friends. Everything will point to them, but it's unclear if it really is them or if it is merely a front." Solaris chewed on his bottom lip. "But there's hope. If you keep your true friends close, everything will work out." He gave her a sad smile. "It just comes down to knowing those who are with you and those who aren't."

Solaris stared at her for a moment before patting her shoulder and departing.

Holly simply sat in silence for several long moments, contemplating what he had said. She had a dreadful sinking feeling in her stomach. The Slytherin sincerely believed that she already knew who would betray her.

Holly and Draco meandered down the Charms corridor, waving goodbye to Blaise, who had promised to meet Luna for some unknown reason. The girl sighed as she watched Justin Finch-Fletchley and a group of Hufflepuffs nervously speed by her, shooting several terrified glances in her direction. The blond, on the other hand,

snarled and would have sent them several vicious retorts if Holly hadn't placed a hand on his arm.

"Don't, Draco," she murmured quietly. "We don't need to give them anything more against us."

The boy shook his head unhappily. "We could give them something to really fear," he stated loudly, sending the students who turned to look a nasty smirk.

They shuddered and hurried on.

Draco sniffed disdainfully. Holly fought the urge to laugh.

The pair soon left the corridor and wandered into the fourth floor proper, trying their best to avoid the numerous other students. Suddenly, Holly felt several very familiar people coming up from behind her, two who made her groan. Draco looked at her with confusion, an appraising expression on his face.

"Hiya, Holly!"

She didn't even bother to turn around. "Hello, Colin... Ginny," she stated in a somewhat strangled tone.

The little boy whizzed around in front of her, dragging a clearly and oddly reluctant Ginny with him. "Hey, hey, how are you today?" he asked, fighting against the crowd.

The other girl was steadfastly avoiding Holly's eye.

"Wonderful, Colin. Truly smashing," she replied weakly.

Her sarcasm was lost on him but not on Draco, who was trying his best not to snort. Belatedly, Holly felt three other familiar minds pass right by, but due to the crowd and her shortness, she couldn't see who they were. However, her gift quickly informed her of their identities, and she fought the urge to scowl.

Creevey beamed. "That's great. Are you looking forward to the Quidditch match against us? I hear our new Seeker's really good."

The tiny Gryffindor gazed at her with wonder as the older students pushed him out of the way.

Holly frowned when she once again noted that she and Colin were the same height.

Ginny hovered behind her Housemate, mysteriously interested in the painting of La Muerte on the far end of the hallway; her mind was completely blank, as though it were either free of thought or was trying to hide. Probably from itself.

“Oh, yes. I am shivering with anticipation.”

Draco managed to turn his snigger into a quite believable cough, but Holly ignored him as one of the familiar minds sparked, having finally noticed her.

“Oh, that’s great.” Colin paused as a seventh-year Ravenclaw almost tripped over him. “Holly, Holly, a boy in class--”

Unfortunately, the tiny boy was unable to complete his sentence as the tide of people carried both his friend and he down the hall.

Holly silently thanked the Maker. Draco merely smiled with satisfaction.

Colin and Ginny were quickly lost in the crowd, pushed all the way down the corridor.

However, Holly didn’t bother to watch them. Instead, her attention was on the bushy-haired girl, the tall redhead, and the slightly rounded boy, who were just now going around the opposite corner and away from her. Holly sighed; she knew they had seen her, but they hadn’t even bothered to stop and say hello.

“The idea of a Chamber of Secrets is completely ludicrous,” Binns all but shouted that afternoon. “It’s as untrue as the legend of the Lifestone.” The spectre silently seethed, shooting Blaise a dirty look for daring to ask such an impertinent question. He had already

explained that this Chamber business was nonsense, but the little brats wouldn't listen.

"Lifestone?" Milli asked curiously, seemingly very interested as she actually put down her copy of the *Quibbler* and turned to face the professor.

The other Slytherins were on the edges of their seats.

Binns, on the other hand, looked as though he wanted desperately to cry, not that he really could as how he was dead.

"Yes, Lifestone," he spit out. "According to legend, it was a magical stone that was said to be able to drain the life-force of an individual and store it for later use," the spectre continued, growling at Milli for making him explain. "The stone was also said to be able to give the energy back to that person or to another," he went on, finally slipping into teaching mode. "Supposedly, it was created by Helga Hufflepuff to aid her in healing and was originally meant as a last ditch effort to sustain others and cure them."

Theo nodded, his eyes suddenly lighting up. "Oh. So it's not real then?" the boy questioned, mischief evident in his posture. "I thought that it was supposed to be real. There's a picture – well, an estimation really – of what it looks like in Hogwarts: A History."

"Really?" Pansy inquired, flipping through her copy of the book, which she had been perusing in place of listening to the lecture. "It's quite pretty, if you are into yellow."

"Regardless," Binns announced in a clipped tone, "it is a pointless exercise. The Lifestone is not real, just as the Chamber of Secrets is not real. There's not a shred of evidence that Slytherin ever built so much as a secret broom cupboard! Now, back to--"

"Why would the book even mention it if there weren't any proof? And don't most legends have a basis in fact anyway?" Daphne added, joining in the chaos with glee.

"While that may be true, there is still no--" Binns started.

“Perhaps the reason everyone thinks the Chamber does not exist is because they cannot find the entrance,” Holly commented to Draco, though she said it loud enough for all to hear. “It’s probably very well hidden – in plain sight most likely.”

The ghost professor goggled at her.

The grey-eyed boy nodded emphatically. “Yes, wouldn’t it be a laugh if the entrance was in Gryffindor Tower!”

Binns tried to interrupt, but he was beaten out.

“Even better,” Blaise stated stridently, “a cupboard. Filch could be keeping his brooms by the entrance and never even know it. Still, he couldn’t get in; you’d probably need a password for it. Something that was passed down along the Slytherin line.”

The teacher was now watching them with something akin to horror.

“That makes sense,” Theo put in with a peculiar glint in his eyes. “As for the Lifestone... well, it was probably lost or something. It could be sitting in some lady’s jewellery collection, and she would never even realise. She could be walking around with it on, admiring the lovely, yellow glitter and golden shine.”

Autumn joined in with great aplomb, “What if she accidentally sucked her life out with it?”

“Or what if she got her soul stuck in it? An object like that could probably suck out that, too,” Cynthia stated, shooting an amused look at the spectre, whose eyes were darting back and forth like he was watching a Muggle tennis match.

“I remember hearing a story about a magus who was trapped in an enchanted object,” Pansy inserted, scrunching her nose in thought. “Somehow, his soul was placed into it accidentally.”

Milli turned all the way around to look at her. “Really? I heard that he voluntarily entered the object and that he stole magic and energy from whoever used it so that he could become immortal.”

Theo laughed out loud, not even bothering to hide his amusement. "That could work, but he was quite stupid though. How was he supposed to get out?"

"Blast if I know," Milli answered, shaking her head. "Though come to think of it, it might have been the Li--"

"No, that's enough. It is **not** real!" Binns cut in, stopping the girl from continuing. "And neither is the Chamber of Secrets! Both are just legends... myths... tall-tells meant to frighten children and the weak minded," he exclaimed, flapping his transparent arms through the air in a parody of a demented bird. "This is a history class. As such, I deal in fact. Cold and completely true... fact! I teach a true understanding of history, not legends and theories!"

Blaise snickered. "Right," he commented to Holly as the class settled down. "Then, why does he so selectively teach it? There's more to history than Goblin Wars and wizarding councils. Why not talk about the Old Ways, and how it was before?" He eyed the oblivious ghost with disdain. "He only teaches what he wants to or what the Ministry allows him, how they see history to be. They don't want us forming our own opinions."

Holly looked up at Binns but said nothing. She felt that Blaise had summed it up quite well.

The days passed quickly, Holly still receiving strange glances, Filch now patrolling the scene of the crime and yelling at students for things like breathing loudly and looking happy. The second-years and company made little headway in discovering more about the Chamber, though it was still on everyone's mind. Holly actually broke down and asked Hermione what she thought about it, but the bushy-haired Gryffindor had only mumbled something and quickly scurried away, her mind whirling with nervousness and her thoughts oddly focused on Draco Malfoy and something about a potion.

And sadly, it wasn't just Hermione or her Gryffindor associates that was now nervous around her. Ron and to a lesser extent Neville seemed torn between their crushes on her and slight queasiness that she might be opening secret chambers, though they did seem to

appreciate the fact that Mrs. Norris was out of commission. Ginny had thankfully stopped following her around, a pleasant change now that Holly thought about it, but the fact that the girl seemed to tremble every time she saw the Slytherin left something to be desired. Colin Creevey, who was still hounding her at every step, had actually asked her point blank if she was the Heir of Slytherin. She never even had the chance to reply as Milli hexed him so badly that he had tentacles growing out of his nostrils and pus filled bumps on various parts of his body for three days.

Once again, Fred and George showed that they were the only sane members of Gryffindor House, completely ignoring the whispering and happily including Blaise in a few pranks. Percy was his usual pompous self, but at least, he wasn't treating her any differently.

Thankfully, though, Holly had much more important things to worry about than a few baseless rumours. Things like her future's forecast, the real culprit behind the Chamber, the diary that was even now sitting in her trunk under her Invisibility Cloak, and of course Quidditch.

The Slytherin-Gryffindor match, which was scheduled for a few days after Halloween, was a much anticipated event. Six of the Serpents' players had returned this year, though Pucey and Flint were seventh-years and would be leaving, and Draco had secretly confessed to her that he planned to try-out for Pucey's spot next year. His father had hopes that he would be a Seeker, but he would much rather be a Chaser.

Additionally, Slytherin had new brooms this season, Nimbus 2001s, which were courtesy of several alumni and parents, namely the Malfoys and Zabini's. However, Holly would still be riding on her own broom as it was faster than anything else she would face on the pitch. Plus, it was her broom, and she already knew all its eccentricities.

Gryffindor, on the other hand, had a brand new Seeker. And one who, according to George, had successfully blown away the competition during the Quidditch tryouts, including the previous Seeker.

Devon Lee, if she remembered correctly, was a fourth-year, who quickly returned the small smile she gave him as she mounted her

broom and waited for the game to start. The strawberry-blond boy actually beamed at her, not shying away in the least. Holly couldn't help but notice that he had very pretty hazel eyes.

Fighting the urge to blush, Holly glanced away, now searching the stands for her friends. She swiftly found them in the Slytherin section, Gavin and Luna both sporting green scarves. Additionally, the first-year appeared to have what seemed to be a snake wrapped around her right arm. Holly didn't even want to contemplate where she had gotten it or if it was a live specimen. She did, however, note that Luna left her seat in the stands, presumably heading for the loo. The dark-haired girl watched as she disappeared down the steps before her gaze focused on the banners that Milli had drawn for both her and the team, which depicted a serpent devouring a lion, among other things.

Noticing that their friend was watching, Blaise, Theo, Milli, and Draco all waved.

Holly waved back before her attention drifted around the stands once more. Her eyes focused on her Gryffindor friends, who actually nodded in her direction but didn't otherwise acknowledge her.

Again, the Seeker's gaze drifted, her eyes not settling on anything in particular. She gently stretched out her senses, wondering where Luna was, and just as her mind was pulled to the right, a mixture of blue, green, and golden blonde in that direction caught her attention. The Slytherin turned, only to focus Luna, taking a few seconds for Holly's mind to register what she was seeing, and she almost instantly frowned.

Luna was standing along the edge of the Slytherin and Ravenclaw stands, obviously trying to make her way back to her friends. Unfortunately for her, Cassius and the vicious third-year, Cho Chang, were blocking her way.

Knowing that she couldn't go to help, Holly's mind sought out Blaise, and her eyes locked with his. But he along with Draco, Theo, and Milli were already halfway there. The two older Ravenclaws rapidly noticed this fact and departed but not before a subtle flick of Luna's wand and a streak of blue-purple hit them in the backside.

Afterwards, the match was quickly underway, Holly circling high above the pitch, her hawk-eyes searching for the Snitch. She absentmindedly noted that her team-mates looked like green and silver blurs on their new brooms, which was a stark contrast to the Gryffindors. However, her concentration quickly snapped back to the match as a black Bludger came careening towards her.

“Oy! That was close, Holly,” Phillip Bole commented as he went by. He whacked the Bludger towards Katie Bell, but strangely, it changed direction and blasted towards Holly again.

She dropped quickly and rolled to the side, the Bludger shooting by her and actually ruffling her ponytail. Once more, Bole swung at it, this time aiming for Devon. Yet, the Bludger came back just like a boomerang, aiming for the Slytherin Seeker’s head.

Growling, Holly took off for the other end, the Bludger in hot pursuit. She swerved in and out of the other players, going quite close to the Gryffindors in the hopes that it would target one of them. It didn’t but did clock Alicia Spinnet in the shoulder in its pursuit of her. The girl sped to the other end of the field, turning sharply as she approached Matthew Derrick, the other Beater, and he whacked the rogue Bludger.

It flew part way towards George Weasley before it headed back to Holly once more.

The Seeker sighed and resumed her aerial ballet. To make matters even worse, it started to rain, but at least, her glasses were charmed to be Impervious, courtesy of Titania.

“Slytherin and Gryffindor tied at thirty,” she heard Lee Jordan announce as Madam Hooch called a time-out.

With relief, Holly landed as Bole and Derrick wrestled the Bludger to the ground. She quickly filled Marcus Flint in on the details of what was happening, not that he didn’t already know. He looked furious and actually wanted to call the match off, but she managed to convince him to let her continue without her Beater escort.

However, she did have a plan. Closing her eyes and exhaling slowly, she lowered her shields and reached out her senses. Her mind stretched forth, and she could feel the tingle of other thoughts. Yet, that wasn't what she was looking for. She mentally searched around, and finally, she found it: the Bludger. Holly could feel it with her mind, feel it homing in on her even as it struggled to get free. She could feel it watching her.

The Seeker gave a resolve-filled nod to Flint, and so her sky-dance continued. She rocketed up into the air and then back down, once more weaving in and out of the players. Her mental sense told her that the Bludger was behind her and to the left, so she dodged right and into George Weasley's path. The Bludger nearly took his head off as it whizzed by.

She gave a slight smirk and flew up and over Angelina Johnson, laughing as the Bludger efficiently knocked the Quaffle out of the black girl's hands. She dove down toward the ground, levelling out about two metres above it before taking to the sky again.

And through all of her aerial manoeuvres, Holly still continued to search for the Snitch. Her gaze flickered all about, looking for the glint of gold through the rain. Minutes passed, she dodged the Bludger once more, running it straight into Fred, who managed to block it at the last second with his bat. Green eyes continued searching, flicking to Devon for an instant before freezing.

The Snitch had just come up behind the boy and darted underneath him, heading for the ground. Luckily, he hadn't noticed, but it was only a matter of time. However, Holly had a plan. She nudged her broom to go a bit faster, rocketing toward the boy. The Seeker looked up, and thinking that Holly was trying to lure the Bludger toward him, he dodged to the side.

The Slytherin grinned and veered around George. She kept approaching Devon, knowing the Snitch was on a parallel course close to the ground.

Unfortunately, it was at the moment that the boy also noticed the Snitch, but it was now closer to Holly.

Still, he had noticed.

Even worse, so had George, who sped up and whacked the Bludger at her, giving it an extra boost.

The girl dove toward the golden ball, the Bludger gaining on her with Devon racing from the opposite direction. The Snitch darted to the side, now heading on a different course, away from both of them, but Holly was in hot pursuit. She inched closer to it and reached out her hand.

WHAM!

The Bludger slammed into her elbow, and Holly heard and felt her arm break. Yet, she gritted her teeth and stubbornly reached out with her other hand.

Devon was now within a metre of her.

The Bludger came around for another pass, now aiming at her face. But it was too late.

Holly threw herself forward and grabbed the Snitch, her momentum plus the slick and wet surface of her broom handle effectively flinging her off of her Nimbus. With a mud cushioned thud, she hit the ground, tucking her head in instinctively. All the air rushed out of her lungs, and she struggled to breathe.

Dazedly, she noticed both Devon and George land near her, instantly going to her side. However, she started as she felt the Bludger returning once more, but George was prepared for it and batted it away.

The Gryffindor Seeker knelt next to her. "Just breathe. In and out," he said in a slow and quite charming drawl.

Thankfully, she managed to comply, air rushing in her lungs. She coughed violently, and a hand cupped her head to keep it from slamming against the ground.

"Easy now."

Hazel eyes were peering at her.

“Take it easy.”

They really were a very pretty colour.

“Great catch, by the way,” Devon stated with a slight grin.

Holly nodded, grimacing with the movement.

“Oh, sorry. You probably shouldn’t move. Just in case. But quickly now – how many fingers?” He held up his hand in front of her face.

“...Three.”

“Good,” Devon replied, but he was suddenly moved back from her as another face came into view.

Holly groaned. “No, not you,” she muttered.

Lockhart apparently didn’t hear, though Devon did.

“Oh, but I’ll fix your arm in a jiff,” the dandy announced to the growing crowd.

By Salazar’s legendary monster, Holly wondered where Blaise, Luna, and Draco were.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Professor,” the Gryffindor Seeker tried to reason, but Lockhart pushed him back into the crowd.

The ponce laughed. “Don’t be silly.” He reached for his wand, a familiar clicking sound in the background.

Colin Creevey obviously loved this.

The dandy flicked his wand.

“NO!” someone, who mysteriously sounded like Blaise shouted, but the damage had already been done.

Holly felt her arm being deflated, the bones disintegrating just as her friends reached her. Blaise growled and knelt next to her, while Luna repeated the action on her other side. Draco, Milli, and Theo rounded on Lockhart, sending the man away before he could do more damage.

Holly merely sighed as Blaise and Luna wiped the mud from her face. She knew she was in for a long night of bone regrowth.

Sure enough, she was right. Holly came out of the Hospital Wing with a stiff arm the next morning, an escort at her side, and a story bursting from her lips. She could scarcely wait to tell the others that during the night Colin had been Petrified and the film in his camera destroyed. Nor could she contain the urge to tell them that Dobby, the ever-looney house-elf, had visited her, proclaiming that his Bludger was meant to send her home.

“Probably in a body-bag” as Autumn put it.

News of Colin’s attack was spreading like wild-fire through the rest of the school by lunchtime. Rumours were flying, ranging from the Gryffindor accidentally Petrifying himself to an evil spirit doing the deed just for jollies to Holly attacking him in a rage over the pictures he had taken of the Quidditch match.

“And speaking of Quidditch matches, how did you manage to escape the Bludger so well, Hols?” Blaise asked later that night as they sat in an otherwise empty study room.

The girl fought the urge to fidget. “I tracked it with my mind,” she murmured.

He raised a surprised eyebrow. “What! Holly, that’s... that’s an extremely advanced telepathic skill – to track an object like that. The ability to sense objects that are tracking you is an ability of upper-level telepaths. Or ones who are very well-trained.” His dark-brown eyes regarded her with something akin to wonder. “You must be very powerful to do that!”

Holly flushed. “I don’t know if I am. I’ve never really tested my limits.”

"Maybe you need to," he alluded, and her head snapped up.

"What?"

He laughed. "I don't mean now, Holly. I mean over Christmas. You can try out your abilities. I volunteer to be your test Kneazle."

"Blaise," she whispered, realising what he offered and the trust that was implicit in the suggestion.

He merely smiled. "It'll be fine. I trust you with my life, Holly. I know that I can trust you with my mind and my few secrets." He patted her on the shoulder before leaning forward and giving her an impulsive hug, which she fiercely returned.

"Thank you," she murmured softly before inclining her head to the side. "Draco's coming."

Blaise nodded and pulled back. "*De nada, amorcita.*" He smiled pleasantly as she mock-glared.

It greatly annoyed Holly when he spoke in Spanish as she didn't understand the language, and he wasn't going to teach her until later.

He winked just as Draco entered the study room and plopped down in a chair near them. The girl merely raised an eyebrow before reaching into her bag and pulling out the diary.

"So you're really going to do it then?" Draco asked after a moment.

"Yes," she stated emphatically. "It's time we get some answers, and who better than the source?"

The two boys glanced at each other.

Blaise exhaled slowly and acquiesced, "I suppose, you're right, but just remember, if anything goes wrong--"

"--You two will be right here to hex the diary into oblivion," she finished.

Blaise pulled out his rowan wand, Draco fetching his ash one.

“That’s right,” they announced together, flashing identical cheeky grins before quickly sobering.

“We’re here for you, Holly. We’ll watch out for you,” Draco said.

She gently inked her quill. “I know.”

With that, she flipped open the diary and slowly wrote on the first page.

Hello. My name is Holly...

De nada, amorcita: You're welcome, little love.

AN: I know that I got bogged down on the whole “magical and Muggle history lesson” thing, and I apologise. I also apologise if it sounds like I am being a bit anti-certain-religion-which-shall-remain-nameless. That is not my intent. I merely wanted to highlight the reasons for the break between the groups and for the dissention in the magical world. Also, a lot of what I said was based on historical fact, though obviously the non-human creatures and magical world parts were made-up. However, there was some fighting between the pagan ways and the new religions, which included death on both sides.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks!

Chapter Seventeen: Serpent Tongue

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Seventeen: Serpent Tongue

Hello. My name is Holly Potter.

Blaise, Draco, and she waited with bated breath, staring as the ink was absorbed into the page. One minute passed and then two, and then...

Hello. It's good to hear from you. Were you the one who wrote earlier, a few weeks ago?

The Slytherin trio exchanged a glance; hesitantly, Blaise nodded, fingering his rowan wand. Draco simply chose to move his chair closer, wand still in hand. Holly eyed the book, her mental senses whirling. Now that the diary was writing back, she could clearly feel the pseudo-presence of the book. Only now, it felt almost like a real person, where before it was much like that of someone asleep.

Yes. May I ask who's speaking?

The green ink sank into the page before reappearing.

Right. I'm sorry. Where are my manners? I'm Tom. Tom Riddle.

Holly blinked, and a feeling of familiarity rose in her mind. She knew that name. She knew it! She just couldn't remember from where. Regardless, she stretched out with her thoughts, creating a vague connection to the consciousness. It was deep enough for her to get the feel of him, but not strong enough for him to notice, if he was even capable of doing such a thing.

Tom Riddle, as in T.M. Riddle... the name on the diary? She scribbled quickly, anticipation building in her. Her head was spinning.

Tom wrote back, *Yes, that's me.* The words paused for a moment, as though he were thinking. *If you don't mind me asking, how did you come by my diary?*

The girl blinked and turned to the others. "What should I say?" She felt a slight buzz in her mind at those words, almost like Tom had heard.

They shrugged. "Just go with the truth, I guess," Draco stated slowly. "What else could you say?"

Once more, Holly felt the buzz, but she wasn't sure what to make of it.

I'm not really sure. I found it in my trunk.

In your trunk? Tom questioned, the speed of the writing increasing. *Hm... has it always belonged to you?*

Holly responded slowly, *No, but before that it belonged to my Muggle relatives. I doubt that is how it got there. I found it among my school things.*

There was a pause.

Tom finally wrote back, *School things? Do you go to Hogwarts?*

Draco and Blaise leaned closer, hovering just beyond her shoulder as she added the next part.

Yes, I'm a second-year. She hesitated for a moment before adding, *In Slytherin.*

The response came faster this time. *Really? That's my House as well. I am... was... a sixth-year.*

The three students exchanged another glance. Holly senses informed her that he was indeed telling the truth, though it was hard to be sure with the odd circumstances. He could be telling her complete rubbish for all she knew. Maybe Blaise was correct; maybe she really did need to find her limits, to practice her abilities more.

The girl felt a slight chill crawl up her spine as she deepened the connection between their thoughts, attempting to discern the truth. The diary really did give off a feeling, much like a human mind, though there was something vaguely out of sink. It was faint, wraith-like, as if the person were exceptionally tired, ill, or very near death.

It was a very similar sensation to the ones she had gotten from Mr. Thorpe before he died. The old man had been the Dursleys'

neighbour from across the street and had become rather ill the year before she had come to Hogwarts. The poor man had all but wasted away, lingering for months before his death, and his mind had reflected that, becoming fainter and fainter with each day. It had actually come as something of a relief when he had died, and it was very disconcerting to be receiving the same feelings from what basically amounted to a little, black book.

Trembling slightly and causing both boys to look at her with worry, she set the quill on the diary again. *If you don't mind me asking, how did you come to be in a diary?* She reused his earlier phrase for emphasis.

The green ink flowed back onto the page, coming even faster now. *I wanted to create a memory and place it in this diary, but something went wrong. I'm not sure what exactly, but somehow, more of me than a memory is in here.*

"More of him than a memory?" Draco asked, wide-eyed.

Holly again felt the buzz from the book as the blond spoke.

"What does he mean by that?" He directed his question at the girl, who shrugged.

What do you mean by more than a memory? She paused, waiting for a response.

I'm not sure; I just feel it somehow. The writing hesitated for a moment. *I'm sorry, but I don't know how to explain it. I just know that I'm not just a memory.*

"Well, that's strange," Blaise commented, though this time it was tinged with something that felt a good deal like exasperation.

Draco shifted and leaned in. "How do we know that we can trust him? He could just be making it all up." The blond did not miss the significant glance Blaise gave Holly nor the tiny affirmative shake of her head.

"We don't," she stated smoothly. "Neither do we have any reason not to believe him. What would he gain by lying?"

The buzz sparked once more, but it was again different.

"Our trust for one thing," the grey-eyed boy replied. "All we have is a name, but we still don't really know anything about him."

Holly reluctantly agreed, thinking it over. "True. I think that we should look him up in the library just to be safe. He could be fooling us all." The significance of her words was not lost on Blaise, who knew that her telepathy was probably going haywire right now. "I'm going to wrap up this conversation."

Blaise stopped her just as she was about to write again. "Before you do, ask him how long he's been in the diary. That way we have a timeframe for the name."

She nodded. Finally, they returned their attention to the still waiting diary. Holly noticed that there was now additional writing.

Hello. Are you still there?

She laid her quill-point on the page. Yes, sorry. If you don't mind my asking, how long have you been... well, a diary?

I'm not sure; a few months, I suppose. Maybe a few years. What's the date?

November 9th. Holly paused for a minute. 1992.

The ink reappeared much faster this time; the scribbling almost frantic.

Fifty years? Fifty years gone!!

The girl felt an overwhelming wave of surprise come from the book. It hit her full force before she could bring up her defences, causing her to gasp and actually draw back. Holly instinctively shielded herself, even as her mind was filled with the frantic thoughts of the diary. The impressions were too chaotic for her to make out much of anything save shock, despair, and desolation.

She recoiled, seeking to steady herself. She blinked as her mind pulled away, completely filtering out Tom. Yet, strangely she could still sense both of her other companions and could distantly feel the others in the surrounding rooms. It seemed as though she was only blocking the diary.

The girl unconsciously sought to comfort both of her friends, projecting that she was fine. Blaise's eyes glazed for a moment, but he quickly recovered. On the other hand, Draco trembled, having no idea what was going on. Realising what she had done, Holly drew back, and the blond relaxed. He blinked somewhat drunkenly and swayed in his seat but recovered within a few seconds.

"What was that?" he asked in a whisper, his eyes focusing on Holly, who was sitting next to him. "You felt that, didn't you?"

Put on the spot, the girl fought the urge to shift in her seat. "...Yes." She exhaled, fighting the still lingering dizziness, a conciliation prize from her mental connection with Tom.

"You think it was the diary?" Draco went on dazedly, slowly sobering up.

Blaise swooped in for the save. "Maybe... but who knows with Hogwarts. Could have been a Petrification attempt," he deflected deftly, sounding as serious and thoughtful as humanly possible.

The younger boy frowned, looking somewhat sceptical. His eyes flickered to Holly, like he had already made the connection that she was responsible. Though, due to her still somewhat reeling thoughts, she couldn't get a clear read on him.

"Perhaps," he finally allowed. "I think we should ask him." He pointed at the diary before once more looking at Holly strangely, his mind turning over what had just happened.

Self-consciously, she placed the tip of her quill on the diary.

Tom? She waited for a few beats. *Tom?*

Yet, there was still no reply; the ink didn't even sink into the page.

The three second-years shifted and waited as the minutes ticked by. Tentatively, Holly adjusted the mental filter, faintly allowing an impression of the diary in. It was still chaotic, so she instantly brought her shields up completely.

She shook her head. "I don't think we will get anything else out of him tonight."

She gave Blaise a significant look, which was not missed by Draco. And Holly felt a shiver run down her spine as she felt the blond's eyes on her back and his suspicion swelling.

"Most likely," Blaise responded, running a hand over his tired face. "We can try again tomorrow then, but I think we should first research what he told us. See if he is indeed telling the truth."

The other two quickly agreed, the lone girl gently shutting the diary. They would indeed try again tomorrow and the next day and the next... until they finally had some answers.

The next day was a Monday and dawned clear if rather cold. It was Holly's first among the general school population after Colin Creevey's attack and was one of Holly's most trying at Hogwarts to date, including the days she had Lockhart's class. Unfortunately, it only seemed to be getting worse as Monday faded into Tuesday and then into the rest of the week.

Everyone had been slightly jumpy around her before, but after the attack of the Muggleborn Gryffindor, they were now eyeing her warily and refusing to even come close to her. Apparently, it had leaked out the Colin had been attacked when he had been on his way to the Hospital Wing, and the students had connected that with the facts that he had annoyed her at the Quidditch and had been harassing her in the corridors. Everyone was now sure that Holly was somehow involved, even if unintentionally.

There were a few exceptions to this belief, however. Slytherin House was rallying around her, forcefully telling off anyone who dared voice their negative opinions. Even Professor Snape, who would gleefully

give her detention from here until Merlin's third coming, was seen and heard vehemently defending her to McGonagall. The argument had taken place in the staffroom but had been heard clear into the corridor. Titania Shacklebolt, who had been passing by at the time, said their Head of House had been quite tenacious in his defence, clearly telling the deputy headmistress exactly what he thought about her rubbish accusations. No matter what the Potions master personally thought of his Serpents, he could always be counted on to protect them.

Alé, Gavin, Luna, and Professor Flitwick were also among Holly's supporters, while most of their House seemed to remain neutral to her with the notable exceptions of Cassius, Cho, and their lackeys. The Ravenclaws were logically looking at the evidence before they formed an opinion.

On the other hand, almost no one out of Hufflepuff would even approach the Slytherin, save Theo's pseudo-friend and very distant cousin Susan Bones, whose contact with Holly before this had been limited to head nods in the hallways. The only other Badger was Cedric Diggory, a Quidditch lover, who played pick-up games with Titania and Flint. Holly was grateful for the unexpected allies as the fifth-year, who she had never even talked to before, was now actually going out of his way to be friendly to her in the corridors and Great Hall, and Susan was occasionally partnering with her in Charms.

As for Gryffindor, Fred and George were still being their usual selves, taking delight in making fun of those that thought Holly a danger. They were now on a pranking streak against the worst of the aggressors with occasional input from Blaise, and with the twins so distracted, they forgot their still lingering grudge against Draco. Percy simply rolled his eyes at the entire mess, pompously stating that he believed her when she said she had nothing at to do with it; she was much too young to be able to perform such complicated Petrification magic anyway. Devon Lee, the Gryffindor Seeker, seemed to be somewhat of a supporter, though he didn't do it very overtly. Still, he would always smile at Holly when he saw her, which was often as he was becoming quite close with the twins, Quidditch having bonded them together.

Ginny, however, avoided Holly like the plague. George had informed the shortest Slytherin that it probably wasn't anything personal, but his sister was a cat lover and was best friends with Colin, not to mention that she wasn't exactly on Holly's good side either; she'd naturally be a bit jumpy.

Nevertheless, Holly's relations with the twins, Percy, and even Ginny were better than those with the Gryffindor trio. While Ron, Hermione, and Neville were now friendly with her on the outside, actually attempting to spend time with her, Holly knew it was all a lie; their very thoughts betrayed them. They were simply watching her, seeing if she would reveal anything to them about the Chamber of Secrets or the Heir of Slytherin. They smiled with her and laugh at her joke, but at the same time, they believed her to be dangerous and attacking other students. Holly felt a distinct stab in her heart every time she even thought about them. If they wanted to know, they could have simply asked. But they hadn't even trusted her enough to do that, and it hurt her badly.

However, she simply shrugged it off whenever Blaise tried to talk about it, storing it in that little box inside her where she kept all of her past hurts. Their lies were placed in there right along with Dudley's cruelty, Vernon's anger, and Petunia's hatred.

Betrayal was always a nasty business, especially so when it was from those who were supposed to care.

Unfortunately, the silent treachery was not their only transgression, much to Holly's heartache. Ron and Neville actually approached Autumn, the only Slytherin Muggleborn in their year, on Thursday, attempting to warn the girl away from her Housemates in general and Holly especially. Yet, their little stunt backfired, not that they even noticed.

Autumn politely listened to them before sending them on their way, only to stomp angrily back to the Common Room as soon as they turned the corner. She then proceeded to tell her year-mates exactly what had transpired. To say they were infuriated would be an understatement, but they kept level-heads at Luna's urging, deciding it would be better for the Gryffindors not to know that they had been

ratted out. Besides, this way they would never know what hit them when the Slytherins retaliated.

Shortly after that, Holly poured out her ever-growing sorrows by writing to Remus, who was always a sympathetic ear. Unfortunately, she didn't know how quickly she would get a response as he was currently out of the country. Further, it wasn't like she could tell him all of her troubles, especially the ones that were truly bothering her.

Thankfully, though, Holly's week had several distractions that served to divert her attention from all the stares. For one, Luna finally received the book on the practical aspect of Mind Magic from her father, and the girls had a chance to look through it, seeing that most of the exercises in there were easy enough to follow but would require some practice to master. Additionally, with the threat of Pansy's upcoming birthday looming, Holly owl-ordered her gift, a lovely lined cloak with a matching scarf and gloves, and helped Milli organise the party.

Of course, Holly also had the unusual diary to distract her.

Nearly a week had passed since the incident with the book, and they along with Luna had researched the name Tom Riddle in the library, discovering that he was in fact a Slytherin sixth-year from fifty years previous. Not only that, but he was a Prefect and eventually Head Boy, though that had obviously been after the diary was made. He had also received an award for special services to the school under somewhat suspicious circumstances, the reason for the award not even listed.

Armed with this information, they had decided to write to him once more, this time introducing Draco, Blaise, and possibly Luna. However, they hadn't gotten a response again. Holly wrote in it everyday to no avail, the ink simply absorbing into the page without reappearing. She constantly used her telepathy on the diary as well, but it seemed as if Tom was too caught up in the fact that fifty years had passed.

He was brooding, and Holly knew it.

There was one unintended consequence of the diary episode, one which Holly was at a loss of what to do with short of directly confronting. Her mental contact with Draco during her moment of weakness had not gone unnoticed, and the grey-eyed boy was on the verge of an epiphany as to what he had actually experienced. It was only a matter of time before he put it all together and realised her for what she was, and Holly couldn't help but feel a shiver of dread. She was hopeful, but there was still no telling how Draco would react to the truth. The girl knew that it would be better for her to confess than for him to guess it on his own, but she was uneasy about the idea, which was why she planned to put it off to before Christmas, hoping the holiday season would at least put him in a more receptive mood.

Regardless of his growing suspicions, the blond was at least nice enough to help Holly with her culture lessons, which she had continued from the summer. He calmly joined in the dancing lessons, usurping Blaise's prerogative, not that the other boy really minded. Holly planned to impress Erendiria, Blaise's mother, the next time she saw her, so the girl worked extra diligently. After all, she only had until December as she was officially spending Christmas with her best friend and his family.

Holly was fiddling with the diary that Saturday as she waited for others to show up for their usual Defence study session. She was simply turning it over in her hands and lightly gauging Tom's mood, which had calmed somewhat but was still turbulent. However, he still hadn't written back yet, the ink simply sinking into the page without resurfacing.

The door opened to the study room, and Theo and Gavin entered. Smiling, Holly set the book down still opened on one of the tables that had been pushed to the side.

"All right there, Holly," Gavin called out in greeting as she came up to them. "Ready for Draco's exciting lesson today?"

She laughed. "Yes, he told me that he's going to teach us a spell to use against Lockhart. I just can't wait."

They both snickered.

"I wonder what it'll be," Theo stated with a wink. "I hope it's something nasty, which is no less than the wanker deserves."

The others began to filter in just as Holly was about to reply, stopping her short. Within minutes, they were all arranged in a loose semi-circle by the walls with Draco in the centre of the room.

The blond looked completely in his element.

"The spell I'm about to show you is a difficult one," Draco stated loftily, partially imitating Lockhart. "I had to practice it day and night for weeks to get it down, but then, it is above OWL standards." He shrugged. "It's called *Serpensortia*, the Serpent Summoning charm."

"*Serpensortia*?" Blaise asked from beside Holly, trying to dissect the word in his head.

The blond replied, "Yes, it conjures a serpent unique to the caster." He paused, noting Holly freeze for an instant. "Didn't you wonder how Luna got her snake for the Quidditch match?"

The Ravenclaw, who had been dreamily humming some nameless tune to herself, smiled at being mentioned.

"You conjured it," Holly put in shrewdly, catching on quickly. She fought the urge to twitch, stiffening her posture instead.

He beamed. "Right in one." Draco flourished his wand. "Ready then?" He waited for their nods, getting rather reluctant ones from Cynthia and Autumn. "Good. I'm going to show it to you first, and then, you can try it later." His grin turned into a smirk, and he brought his wand up.

"*Serpensortia*."

And a black asp shot out of it, landing on the floor with graceful ease.

It hissed and flicked its tongue, turning its head about. Its eyes gazed around the room, finding each person in turn. It looked at Holly, and

she froze. It was in that instant for some strange reason, the girl just knew the serpent was female. The asp arched up, staring at the girl intently and not even bothering to look at the others. Blaise stared at the snake with alarm, instantly inching closer to Holly, while the other students just watched with something akin to astonishment.

Holly hissed under her breath, so softly that the others couldn't hear, but apparently, the snake could. The Slytherin saw her mouth move, but what came out was a hiss.

“A sspeaker?”

The girl's eyes widened, and all around her the others stared as the snake immediately slithered toward her. Holly was still frozen, but Blaise was not. He instantly raised his wand and pointed it toward the serpent.

The snake opened her mouth again. ***“You are a sspeaker, are you not?”*** She seemed to be waiting for a reply as she moved even closer.

Holly took a step back, but the blasted serpent kept coming. It was almost to her feet when...

“Evanesco!”

Holly's head instantly snapped up, staring directly at Draco, who had his wand pointed at the spot the snake had just been. She trembled, not at all liking the strange looks she was receiving; it was a tad bit too reminiscent of the Dursleys.

A moment passed in complete and heavy silence.

“What was that?” Autumn breathed, finally breaking the quiet. “Seriously, what was that? That snake... it was just...” she trailed off, noticing that everyone was now staring at her instead.

“It was weird,” Vince asserted, actually speaking for once.

“Very dodgy,” Greg concurred, and the two lapsed into silence as usual.

The Ravenclaw boy shook his head in agreement. "Well," Gavin began slowly, "it was like the serpent was attracted to Holly."

Pansy nodded, thinking it over. "Yes, it looked at all of us, but as soon as it saw Holly, it went right to her." She shivered at the memory as she was not overly fond of reptiles.

Holly didn't say anything, her eyes still going from one of her friends to the next.

"That's right," Theo put in. "It hissed at you and then..." His eyes widened; he was giving her a shrewd and calculating look, and she wasn't sure if she liked it.

Blaise finished for him, addressing Holly, "You hissed back."

"It was almost like you were talking to it," Luna added, her face very pale.

Holly couldn't quite contain her flinch.

"What?" Autumn questioned, twirling a strand of red hair. "Is that even possible?"

Daphne asserted, "Sure, if you happen to speak Parseltongue."

Cynthia, who was hovering between the two, clarified at the Muggleborn's confused expression, "Snake language."

Everyone was once again gazing at Holly, who was steadfastly examining the far wall.

"Snake language," Blaise repeated slowly, not liking where this was going at all as he saw her visible stiffen.

Another quiet minute passed before Draco asked softly, "Are you... are you a Parselmouth, Holly?" He tentatively stepped toward her. "It's the only conclusion that makes any sense."

She didn't answer. Instead, the tiny girl looked around wildly, gauging the looks she was receiving.

Blaise gazed at her with an indecipherable expression. Milli's face was completely white, drained of all colour. Theo and Gavin were staring at her with blank faces, entirely unreadable. Even all of Luna's attention was focused on her, the blonde's normally dreamy expression completely forgotten and her eyes impossibly large.

Holly didn't even try to reach out with her telepathy, too afraid of what she would find. The girl glanced around again, her eyes flickering to the door to her friends and back. She quickly stepped toward it, but Blaise's hand on her wrist kept her from making good her escape.

The girl looked up at him, the difference in their heights readily apparent. "Let go of me," she said through gritted teeth.

"No."

"Yes, let go!" she retorted heatedly, trying to jerk her hand away.

However, Blaise had a very tight grip.

She trembled, fighting her building panic.

He answered in a gentle whisper, softly running his thumb across her skin, "No, I won't. I'm not going to let you run away. We need to talk about this." Blaise tugged on her wrist, all but dragging her to one of the chairs against the wall.

Holly resisted for a moment, but knowing it was useless since he was a good deal stronger than her, she gave up. The girl reluctantly allowed him to push her into a vacant seat, and he plopped down in the one beside her, his hand still on her arm.

His knees were touching hers; he was that close. Blaise didn't really seem to notice, even though Holly did. She tried to shift away from him, but his free hand went to her other knee, keeping her firmly in place.

The others moved in, all eager for an answer, forming a semi-circle around them.

“An explanation would be nice, Holly,” Draco stated quietly, standing in front of her.

She was once more silent, and the others exchanged a glance.

“What’s going on, mate?” Theo asked from the side. “You can tell us, you know.”

Milli concluded, “You can trust us.” She eased forward, obviously wanting to comfort the other girl.

When his friend didn’t answer, Blaise prompted her, “Holly.”

She simply turned her head away, refusing to answer. The girl sniffled slightly and slammed her mental shields up completely when she felt a gently probe from Luna.

The Ravenclaw visibly flinched. “Holly, Holly... please,” Luna pleaded gently, finally speaking.

The older girl sighed, her eyes moist, the pleading quality of Luna’s voice finally her undoing. “I... I don’t know. I never really thought about it before. It was just a thing... a game I used to play when I was younger. I haven’t done it in ages.” She shrugged and bowed her head. “I tried to pretend that it wasn’t real, push it from my mind.”

“Holly...” Blaise started but faltered as he had no idea what to say. He felt her tremble beneath his fingertips.

She told them, lost in memory, “It was just a game. I used to pretend that I could talk to the snakes in the garden and understand them. I would do it while I was pulling weeds and planting flowers, and they’d follow me around, pointing funny things out to me, trying to help me,” Holly said quickly, all in a rush. She was rambling, and she knew it.

“The last time I did it was when I was six. Petunia caught me. She so very angry and...”

She trailed off, remembering the horrible beating she had received when the Dursley matron had happened upon her little playacting one day. Holly hadn’t seen the harm in it at the time, but now, she realised

the game for what it really was. Looking back, it all made sense. Petunia had caught her doing magic and had subsequently punished her for it, punished her within an inch of her life; she still had the marks to prove it.

Holly flinched as Blaise unconsciously tightened his grip. Undoubtedly, he had realised exactly what Petunia had done to her, or at least, he suspected. Feeling her tremble, he released her completely. The boy rubbed both hands over his face before massaging his temples for a second, and Holly looked at him, watching as he became somewhat blurry due to moisture in her eyes.

In the background, she heard some of the others shuffling out. They certainly realised that this was an incredibly private moment, and it would only become more so. Only those she was closest to remained behind.

Belatedly, Holly noticed that Blaise was now leaning forward, his face centimetres from hers. Draco was by the arm of her chair with Luna standing directly behind her. Theo and Milli were also hovering nearby.

Holly gazed at her best friend's knee, unwilling to meet his eyes. "Afterwards, I just pretended that it didn't mean anything. My little friends knew that I couldn't talk to them anymore without being punished, so they stop coming around." The girl shifted, her ponytail shifting to cover her face. "I didn't want anyone to know, especially after the Heir mess started. They're already afraid, just imagine what they would do if they knew." She whispered softly, "I was afraid that you would hate me, too, so I didn't say anything, continued pretending it was a just a childish flight of fancy." She paused before adding more to herself than to him, "Just think of how Hermione, Ron, and Neville would react."

The others were all virtually Petrified as she spoke, barely even breathing. Draco was completely stone-faced, his pupils so dilated that there was just a thin, silver ring around the black. Luna was equally shocked, her face white as her namesake. She attempted to project soothing thoughts to her friend, but she knew she was failing in the attempt. Milli had her hand on Theo's arm, squeezing it so

tightly that the bruises were already starting to form. In turn, Theo's eyebrows were nearly even with his hairline. And Blaise... Blaise looked exceptionally pained, as though her very words hurt him.

"Holly," he murmured after a long pause. "Holly, look at me."

When she didn't, he gently lifted her face. She finally glanced up and was somewhat taken aback when she noticed him smiling despite the fact that his eyes were very red. He looked as though he had been crying.

"This is fine, Holly. The Parselmouth thing. It doesn't bother us in the slightest," Blaise added, guessing quite accurately what she was thinking. He rubbed her cheek.

"We don't think any less of you," Luna inserted from the side, and Holly turned all the way around to look at her.

Draco went on, "It's just an ability. It doesn't define who you are."

"You're still our friend, you know," Theo put in softly. "This doesn't change anything."

"But it does." Holly put in fiercely, "This is exactly what Salazar Slytherin was known for, and you see what everyone thinks of him! For all you know, I could be the Heir!" Her voice was steadily rising. "Parseltongue is what the Dark Lord is known for, and everyone knows how he turned out. I most likely got this from him and his blasted curse!" She was practically shouting now, but her voice suddenly took a deathly quiet tone.

"They would hate me if they knew, wouldn't they?" she asked rhetorically, referring to the other Houses. "They would absolutely loathe me, especially with the--" She had forgotten herself for a moment, nearly mentioning her Mind Magic.

The others caught her slip, a strange expression fluttering across Draco's face.

Luckily, it faded into the background as she carried on, "This changes everything." She was nearly in tears by this point, but just as she had

done many times before, she blinked them back, refusing to allow such a weakness.

Blaise interrupted her before she could continue, gently carding his fingers through her hair, "No, it doesn't. You are still you, and we know you aren't some evil Parseltongue bent on world domination. So what if this gift is from the Dark Lord; you're nothing like him. As for being the Heir of Slytherin... well, he lived a thousand years ago, so we can't possibly know. What does it matter if you are anyway?"

"Parseltongue doesn't make you evil, Hols," Milli stated fiercely, she pushed herself in between Draco and Luna. "It **is** just an ability, just thing."

Holly clearly didn't look convinced; however, she remained silent

The heavy-set girl was about to speak again, but Blaise stopped her. "I think that is enough for now."

Holly sent him a grateful little smile. It was barely an upturning of the corners of her lips, but it reassured him more than anything else could.

He scooted his chair back and rose, offering her a hand up. She took it, and Blaise held fast as soon as she was on her feet.

She hesitated for a moment. "I know it doesn't make me evil, but..." she trailed off with a slight snuffle.

"You still wonder about it," he responded knowingly, blinking his red-rimmed eyes, "and you're afraid of what people would do if they ever found out."

Her silence was answer enough. Yet, Blaise gave her an encouraging smile.

"We won't say anything to anyone, will we?" he questioned the others, who all readily voiced their assent.

"No."

“Of course not.”

“Not unless you want us to.”

“I promise.”

“And the others will keep it quiet, too” Blaise went on. “They’ll keep it to themselves, and we’ll make sure they don’t harass you about it either. Friendship, House solidarity, and all that rot, you know,” he inserted with a sly wink, and Holly’s lips twitched again, causing him to relax.

She murmured, “Thank you.” Holly belatedly offered him a transfigured tissue so that he could wipe his eyes, and part of her regretted the fact that he had to cry for her.

“What are friends for?” Draco questioned rhetorically, reaching out to squeeze her shoulder.

Her lips twitched a third time.

Blaise gently tugged her along as he headed for the door, the others filing in his wake. Milli stepped in next to Luna, who was once more humming absentmindedly. Theo simply shook his head, moving to the heavy-set girl’s other side. Exhaling inaudibly, Draco turned to follow, only stopping to pick up the still opened diary.

There was a slight undercurrent among the group the rest of the weekend, but true to their word, her closest friends explained to the others. She was once more met with statements of encouragement and friendship, but it was clear that Holly was somewhat disbelieving. The matter was dropped soon afterwards, becoming a taboo topic until the green-eyed girl was ready to talk about it. Yet, it hovered around them much like the figurative pink dragon that everyone saw, but no one commented on.

The only real positive thing to note about that weekend was the fact that Tom started replying to them once more on Sunday. He apologised for ignoring them, naming his shock as the main reason.

However, they really couldn't blame him for that one; they'd probably react the same way had they been in his situation.

Holly did, in fact, introduce him to Blaise, Luna, and Draco. Though she didn't mention the rest of her year-mates, who weren't even aware of the diary's existence. While the other three did spend some time writing to Tom, it was Holly who talked with him the most, writing to him every morning before breakfast, every night before bed, and at various times during the day. As such, it was Holly who learned the most about Tom's life and how strangely similar they were.

Like the girl, Tom was an orphan, though he had been raised in an orphanage both before and after he came to Hogwarts. He was a half-blood, the result of an ill-fated marriage between a witch and a Muggle. Additionally, Tom was quite the reader and the student, loving knowledge and striving to better himself. He even looked somewhat similar to her, though obviously male. She had had not yet seen his picture, but based on his physical description of himself, she could mentally picture him now.

As the days passed, the girl felt her initial connection with him grow, and soon enough, Tom became her own portable confidant. She told him of her life at the Dursleys, mentioning things she had never told anyone, not even Blaise. She informed him about Dudley and his favourite game of "Holly Hunting", about Petunia and her hatred of all things magical, and about Vernon and his tendency to use his fists to discipline for every supposed infraction.

In turn, she learned about Tom's own abusive past. She learned how the caretaker of the orphanage despised him in much the same fashion that Vernon and Petunia hated her, about how the other children were afraid of him. That he had only had one real friend at that place, an older girl, who had left when he was six. Hogwarts had been a godsend to Tom, just as it had been to her.

It was just easier to talk to Tom about those sorts of things than her other friends; he understood where she was coming from since he had experienced something similar. Or maybe it was because she didn't have to look at him, didn't have to see the pity on his face.

Tom quickly and completely filled the void that had been left by the three Gryffindors. Yet, the Slytherin girl still refrained from telling him everything just to be safe. Her telepathy and the Parseltongue remained her closely guarded secrets. Additionally, she was cautious to monitor his feelings and thoughts as best she could, though it was somewhat difficult, just as Blaise had advised. One could never be too careful, after all.

Plus, they still didn't know if he was telling the truth.

Weeks passed. November came and went without even a mention of the snake incident, and their extra Defence lessons continued as usual, although Draco didn't try to teach them the *Serpensortia* spell again. Yet, unbeknownst to him, Holly practiced it on her own. She had actually succeeded in conjuring a serpent, a beautiful coral snake, who she had tentatively talked with for almost an hour.

Quidditch practice continued even with the loss of their captain, Marcus Flint, who was sent home due to a bad case of Dragon Pox. Titania rose to replace him until his return, but it was impossible to know when that would be as his illness was very advanced. It was probable that he wouldn't return for weeks, perhaps even months.

It became quite the fixture to see Holly writing in the diary during that time. The smallest Slytherin had charmed the initials on the cover to be invisible, so there was no reason to think anything strange of her writing in the book. The other second-years simply thought she was now keeping a journal, something they believed would help her immensely. Additionally, Draco suggested that Holly casually mention to the others that she now had a pen friend named Tom, so if they slipped up and mentioned him, no one would be suspicious.

A few days into December, the sign-up sheet to stay at Hogwarts circulated through the Common Room. Holly didn't bother with it as she was going home with Blaise, although she did notice that Draco, Vincent, and Greg all signed up. Their parents were all going to some nameless gathering on the continent and would be gone for the entire time. When Holly realised that several additional students with Death Eater ties were also staying or were going home with friends, she shuddered to think what the conference was about.

Blaise actually invited Draco to come stay with him also. He would have done the same for the other two, but he didn't know them very well, despite their friendship. However, the blond graciously thanked him before turning him down. His parents had given him explicit instructions to stay at school. In response, Holly and Blaise then offered to stay, too, but the grey-eyed boy told them not to bother. In an aside to Blaise, he stated that he felt Holly needed to be away from the school, and this would be their only opportunity.

It also came to her attention that Ron, Hermione, and Neville were staying for Christmas as well, but it wasn't very odd as the twins, Ginny, and Percy remaining at the castle, the Weasley parents going to Egypt to visit Bill. Hermione and Neville were probably just staying to support their friend. At least, that was what Holly thought until one Potions lesson the second week of December.

She had taken to avoiding the three Gryffindors after the stunt they had pulled with Autumn, and even though they tried to be friendly with her, their minds still gave them away. So it was a surprise to her when she witnessed them purposely create a distraction in Professor Snape's class so that Hermione could steal ingredients. It came as even bigger shock when she ghosted their thoughts, gleaning one phrase and the gist of what they planned to do.

Afterwards, Blaise and she immediately asked Titania exactly what Polyjuice Potion was, only to frown when they learned. Yet, a few subtle warnings to their friends and a very direct one to Draco solved their problems before they even started.

A week later, Holly, Luna, and Milli were leaving the Great Hall after lunch when they noticed a growing group of people gathered around a notice on the board.

"Oh, look," Milli, the tallest of the three by far, commented as she craned her head. "They're having a meeting for a Duelling Club tonight at eight."

Holly's eyebrows rose. "Sounds interesting. Do you want to check it out?" she questioned her companions.

"Yes."

“That would be lovely. Perhaps Professor Flitwick will be the instructor; he was a duelling champion in his younger days,” Luna supplied as she rocked from foot to foot to some nameless tune.

“Interesting,” the smallest girl commented. “Though I can see why he was. As small as he is, it must have been next to impossible to actually hit him.” She frowned slightly, thinking of her own size. “Not to mention he knows many spells.” She made a quick mental note to tell Blaise and Draco about the club.

Milli acquiesced, gazing over Dean Thomas’ shoulder to look at the notice again, “True. Do you think he’ll have helper? Maybe one of the older students or another professor.”

“Probably,” Holly said as she noted the number of people in the crowd. “With this many interested, he’ll need it.” She belatedly noticed a familiar brunet with Ravenclaw robes standing to the side of the crowd.

Luna stopped her dancing as she moved closer to the other girls. “I just hope it’s Lockhart.”

And the Slytherins turned to stare at her.

The blonde giggled. “That way he can be **accidentally** cursed by the students.” Clearly, she meant that they would have the opportunity to jinx him when his back was turned.

Holly blinked, and Milli beamed with pride.

“Why, Luna! That was positively Slytherin. I knew you were truly one of us at heart.” The heavy-set girl sniffed dramatically. “I’m so very proud.”

The other Slytherin smiled, although it took a hard turn as several students passed them by. “Hopefully, he won’t be the only one we can hex,” Holly finally replied, shooting a scathing look toward the quickly retreating Cassius Debello.

Milli rubbed her hands together with glee. “Oh, let’s hope so.” She smirked widely, looking very much like the Kneazle that had eaten the Snidget. “This’ll be so much fun.”

AN: I am not too sure about the Tom parts, but this is just how it decided to write itself. It might eventually be changed though.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks!

Chapter Eighteen: Christmas Confessions

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Eighteen: Christmas Confessions

You should have seen it, Tom, Holly wrote later that night, recalling the incident that had taken place an hour before.

She had just been at the first, and presumably last, meeting of the Duelling Club. It had been interesting, to say the least, and Holly had immediately dashed back to her dorm to tell Tom all about it.

It was completely insane. Lockhart was in charge, so that should give you an idea of how much control there actually was in the situation She hesitated for a moment, not wanting to spoil the mood by adding the last part of her duelling experience.

Really? Well, did you at least enjoy it? Learn anything useful? Have a good time? He paused then, and Holly had the distinct impression that had he a body, he would have smiled tightly. *Or perhaps you took the opportunity to “accidentally” hex Lockhart and the other fools a few times? Not that they don’t deserve it after the way they’ve treated you,* Tom wrote back to her, the dark-blue ink appearing once more.

A grim grin appeared on her face. *No, but my friends and fellow Slytherins did teach them a lesson.* She hesitated for a moment. *Though, I sincerely doubt that the Gryffindors will even realise it for what it was. They’ll simply put it off as either bad luck or the other Slytherins simply being contrary.*

Tom seemed to be thinking about it. *Interesting. From what you’ve told me, that Ron character is fairly dense and Hermione doesn’t have a subtle bone in her body. Neville seems to be the only one with redeeming qualities, but even he’s going along with the status quo.* The ink came quicker then as he began to mock them. *“Slytherins are all evil gits, not to be trusted. They’ll attack without provocation or reason...” and all the rest of that rot.* He added the last bit with a fair share of ridicule and disdain. *It’s all rubbish, and if they bothered to look, they would know it.*

True, she acquiesced and nodded absentmindedly, not that Tom could see it.

A moment passed.

So what exactly happened, Holly? You never did say, Tom scribed, the ink forming in his neat but elegant handwriting.

Holly's eyes brightened, her lips tilting upwards as she was lost in memory. *Well...*

(Flashback)

Thirty minutes before eight that evening, the entire group of Slytherin second-years plus one of their token Ravenclaws entered the Great Hall. The five tables were gone, replaced by a long, golden stage, which was next to the left-hand wall. Already, there was a crowd with even more people flowing in every moment. At the rate that the room was filling, it seemed as though the entire school would soon be assembled.

"There're quite a number of people here," Draco commented from beside Blaise as the entire group approached the stage, his silvery eyes scanning the area. "Though, it isn't really that much of a surprise."

Holly nodded in agreement. "With all the attacks going on, I'm sure that they want to learn to defend themselves," she stated in an undertone as she watched several students edge away from their group.

Milli shot the offenders a death glare, causing them to scurry away even faster. "At least this Heir business has a few benefits."

"Indeed," Blaise intoned, taking Holly's hand and squeezing fiercely. "We get a spectacular spot." He waved his hand in the air, encompassing the middle of the stage that was a mere metre in front of them.

"But we can't seem to get rid of everyone," Theo threw in as he noticed three Gryffindors rapidly approaching them. He seemed less than pleased.

Holly, whose senses had already registered their approach, fought the urge to groan as Hermione, Ron, and Neville saddled up to her. She bit back a growl, wishing that she had been in the middle of their group instead of on the edge, but she had situated herself there so that she could see Luna when the girl entered the Great Hall. The Ravenclaw had been held up by McGonagall over an essay the woman had received about transfiguring lint into honey. Apparently, the paper was supposed to be on turning a needle into a toothpick.

Fortifying her resolve, Holly glanced at the new arrivals. "Hello," she greeted them, plastering a grin on her face.

"Oy, Holly, it's been ages since we last saw you," Ron put in cheerfully, gazing at her with a strange expression. It still seemed as if his mind was battling with his like of her and his certainty that she was attacking students.

Neville gave her a small wave, his mind also in turmoil. "Hi, Holly. How are you?" His thoughts were confident that she was innocent, but he didn't want to go against Ron, Hermione, and the rest of his House. He was equally certain that so many people couldn't possibly be wrong.

She gave him a genuine smile, trying to be encouraging. Neville blushed fiercely and turned his head, hoping that no one had noticed.

"Hello, Holly," Hermione intoned without a shred of doubt in her mind. She was absolutely certain that the Slytherin was the culprit, but she was slightly nervous about giving this knowledge away. "We haven't seen you in a while."

"Really? Imagine that," Draco whispered in the smallest Slytherin's ear from directly behind her. "It's almost like she was avoiding you." He dodged her elbow to his stomach.

Hermione sniffed, wondering what he had said. "Hm... I notice that Luna's not here. Is she coming?" The bushy-haired Gryffindor desperately hoped the answer was no.

Holly's lips were attempting to betray her, wanting to form a smirk. "Oh, yes, she was held up by Professor McGonagall." She triumphed over her rebellious mouth, forming a thoughtful frown.

"Oh?" the other girl inquired, not really caring as long as the deputy headmistress kept the Ravenclaw away.

"Look," Blaise put in, noticing the Ravenclaw come through the doors. "She's here now, so no worries." He smiled at her charmingly and winked.

From his other side, Milli and Theo both smirked.

Hermione mentally grumbled as Luna drifted over to them, greeting everyone but her. The next few minutes passed with a degree of tension in the Gryffindors, but the Serpents simply ignored both it and them, choosing to talk amongst themselves. Several times Hermione attempted to engage Holly in a conversation, but Draco had pulled his friend off to the side, farther into their group and away from the Gryffindors. Holly could feel the frustration coming off the bushy-haired girl in waves. Undoubtedly, Luna, who was deep in conversation with Blaise, Milli, and Theo, could also.

More students filtered in, and Holly quickly noticed that the majority of her House seemed to be gathered near her group. In fact, with the exception of the Gryffindor trio, Gavin, and Luna, all the students around them were Slytherins. Smiling to herself at this little show of House solidarity, Holly gave a small wave to Titania Shacklebolt and the rest of the Quidditch team. The dark-skinned fifth-year waved back, giving her a winning smile, though the look turned predatory when her eyes flickered to Neville.

At eight exactly, Lockhart strode in followed by none other than Professor Snape. The dandy, who was resplendent in robes of deep plum, beamed at all those gathered. The Potions master merely glared, the look considerably softened whenever his eyes landed on his Serpents. As he approached the stage, his gaze flickered to Holly, but it didn't harden. Instead, it swept over her but not before he gave her a discreet nod.

From next to her, Draco gave a pleased sniff. However, she didn't have a chance to comment as Lockhart chose that moment to speak.

"Gather round, gather round. Can everyone see me? Can you all hear me? Excellent!" He paused as everyone moved closer to the stage, and a group of older Slytherins edged in with their younger Housemates. "Now, Professor Dumbledore has granted me permission to start this little duelling club, to train you all in case you ever need to defend yourselves as I, myself, have done on countless occasions – for full details, see my published works." He smiled then, giving what was supposed to be a charming grin, but to Holly it felt completely flat.

The ponce waved his hand behind him, indicating the other teacher. "Let me introduce my assistant, Professor Snape. He tells me he knows a tiny little bit about duelling himself and has sportingly agreed to help me with a short demonstration before we begin. Now, I don't want any of you youngsters to worry – you'll still have your Potions master when I'm through with him, never fear!"

Draco leaned in closer to her and whispered, "Wouldn't it be great if our Head blasted him into oblivion? Save me the trouble."

Holly sniggered as she couldn't help but agree.

From the stage, Professor Snape's lip curled as he sent the dandy a glare of complete and utter loathing. Holly's eyebrows rose as she noticed that this glower was even worse than the ones he usually sent to her. Apparently, the Potions master really and truly detested Lockhart, much like the rest of his House did.

With an abrupt turn, the professors faced one another, bowing. The Slytherin Head gave a small jerk of his head, his eyes never once leaving his opponent. Lockhart, on the other hand, gave a great flourishing bow, bending at the waist with his eyes going to the various awe-struck female students. Both men held their wands in front of them, much like one would a sword.

The dandy again looked at the various pupils. "As you see, we are holding our wands in the accepted combative position," he informed them, once again failing to maintain eye contact with his opponent.

“On the count of three, we will cast our first spells. Neither of us will be aiming to kill, of course.” He seemed so certain of his answer, too.

Holly snickered and murmured to Draco, “I wouldn’t bet on that.”

The blond nodded in agreement.

“One... two... three...”

Both wands moved, Lockhart again flourishing, while the Potions master barely moved his. Professor Snape only shifted it enough so that it would be aimed at the other teacher.

“*Expelliarmus!*” the Potions master called distinctly, not really raising his voice but still managing to be clearly heard.

The scarlet light that shot out of his wand hit Lockhart square in the chest, blasting him off of his feet. He smashed into the far wall and slid down to land in a heap on the floor.

Almost unanimously, the Slytherins cheered. A few select Ravenclaws did, too. From nearby, Holly heard Hermione squeak, “Do you think he’s all right?” followed by Ron and Neville’s reply, “Who cares?”

Lockhart shakily climbed to his feet, blathering about how he had known exactly what Professor Snape was about to do. He received a glare of imminent death and instantly desisted, for once showing some sense.

Nervously, the Defence teacher suggested, “Enough demonstrating! I’m going to come amongst you now and put you all into pairs. Professor Snape, if you’d like to help me...”

They began moving among the crowd, Snape zeroing in on Holly’s area. He teamed Neville with Titania, who had been nearby, before partnering Theo with Ron and Milli with Hermione. All three Slytherins exchanged a nod and a knowing glance. Seemingly pleased with himself, the teacher then paired Blaise with Luna and approached Draco and Holly.

“Mr. Malfoy, Miss Potter,” the professor’s silky voice intoned, “I do believe that the two of you should partner. I sincerely doubt that any of the other fools are up to the task of taking on someone of your **famous** calibre, Miss Potter.” A strange smirk tugged at his lips as he moved off.

Draco simply shrugged, quite pleased with the circumstances. “Shall we show them what we’re capable of, my lady?” he asked dramatically, eyeing the Hufflepuff fourth-years who were staring at them from a ways away.

“Why, yes, good sir,” Holly answered with equal theatrics, stepping away from him.

Lockhart interrupted their exchange, “Face your partners! And bow!”

The pair did so, imitating their Head of House, though their movements were more graceful.

“Scared, Potter?” Draco asked her with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

Holly sniffed disdainfully. “You wish.” She smirked at him.

Over by the stage, the ponce called out, “Wands at the ready! When I count to three, cast your charms to disarm your opponents – only to disarm them. We don’t want any accidents. One... two... three...”

Both Slytherins moved early, knowing that in a real duel one wouldn’t want to wait. The blue light of Draco’s spell whizzed by as she sidestepped. Her own silvery Tickling charm nailed him in the stomach as she had purposely aimed it low, anticipating that he would duck, just like his thoughts had suggested. Draco could barely contain his laughter and sank to his knees, clutching at his now aching sides. Knowing it was unsporting, Holly still refused to hang back. In a true duel, her opponents wouldn’t and neither would his.

In the background, she could hear Lockhart calling for them to stop, but she purposely ignored him. She cast her own Disarming charm, sending Draco’s wand flying towards her, even as he fired off a Tap-dancing jinx. However, she was prepared for this and nimbly sidestepped again. At the exact same moment, she reached out and

snatched his wand from the air in a Seeker-worthy catch. Smiling, she moved to end the Tickling charm, but she was beat to it.

"Finite Incantatem!" the Slytherin Head of House snarled.

Draco immediately stopped laughing. The green-eyed girl helped him to his feet, checking him over for injury.

"Good show, Holly," he acknowledged, taking her hand. He rose completely, slow to release her, and the two moved to check on their friends.

Blaise was jovially handing Luna her wand, while Titania was fixing all the curses she had unleashed on Neville. Theo was slowly removing a batch of tentacles from Ron's face and arms, having pocketed the redhead's wand, while the boy groaned in agony on the floor. Oddly, the edge of the tall Serpent's robe was scorched, almost like it had recently caught fire.

Nearby, Hermione and Milli were still moving. The bushy-haired Gryffindor was trapped in a headlock, whimpering in pain from a combination of that and the boils on her nose and lips. Seemingly satisfied, the heavy-set girl released her, casually leaving her on the stone floor and sauntering over to her friends. She gave Holly a very pleased grin as did Theo and Titania before the older witch moved off with the other Quidditch players. The smallest Slytherin raised an eyebrow at her friends' subtle payback. Draco simply gave an elegant shrug, soon engaging her in a rehash of their duel, while Lockhart flitted about the various injured students in a tizzy.

"I think I'd better teach you how to **block** unfriendly spells," Lockhart commented absentmindedly as he tried to stem Ernie Macmillan's bleeding nose. "Let's have a volunteer pair. Longbottom and..." he trailed off, noticing that Neville no longer had a partner.

His eyes flickered around, and he said instead, "Right, Weasley and Nott, how about you--"

Professor Snape sneered at the mention of the redheaded Gryffindor. "A bad idea, Professor Lockhart," he intoned, gliding over in his normal manner, much like a rather large and malevolent bat.

“Weasley causes devastation with the simplest spells.” He eyed the edge of Theo’s robe where Ron had scorched it with a misstated hex. “I do not fancy sending one of my Slytherins to the Hospital Wing in a matchbox.”

Ron’s face went completely red, making his still lingering tentacles look very peculiar.

“Perhaps someone else then?” the Potions master suggested evenly. “Different Houses would be best.” He looked to be on the urge of smiling. “How about Potter and DeBello?”

“Excellent idea!” The Defence teacher gestured both of them up to the stage, completely missing the girl’s contemptuous sniff.

Holly’s eyes flickered to Professor Snape as she passed him, for once receiving an impression from his mind. It was a strange thing as he normally had impeccable shielding, but she simply put it down to the excitement of the situation. He was practically giddy, if he was even capable of such an emotion, with putting one of his Serpents against someone she despised, one of her main antagonists with the Heir of Slytherin affair. The Potions master actually desired for her to best him. The teacher was giving her a chance to work off her frustrations against the Ravenclaw in a sanctioned manner, one where she could hex him and get away with it.

Nodding to herself, Holly made a silent vow to herself as she climbed onto the stage and faced the brunet third-year; she was going to send the figurative olive branch to her Head of House, trying to make peace with him. It was the least she could do with his defence of her as of late.

“Now, Holly. When Cassius points his wand at you, you do **this**,” Lockhart commented, trying to help the younger student.

She simply ignored him, keeping her gaze on her opponent. She would bet ten Galleons that she knew better blocks than the ponce any day.

Holly eyed the older boy, getting his mental measure. She could hear his thoughts, and what she learned worried her. She did not like the

sound of “slaying a serpent” one bit. However, she searched her mental spell list, coming up with a useful shield Draco had taught them just days before.

“Three... two... one... go!”

“*Protego*,” Holly said softly, sidestepping the Tripping jinx Debello sent her way.

The older boy growled and followed it up with a Banishing charm that she ducked, falling to her knees to avoid it. She, in turn, sent an Impediment jinx and a Freezing charm, while attempting to climb to her feet. However, before she could, the Ravenclaw sent a Reductor curse aimed directly at her chest.

The spell came at her too rapidly, and she was forced to block it with her shield. However, since she was already low to the ground and to the side of him, the angle was strange. The spell deflected into the audience, nearly taking Justin Finch-Fletchley’s head off as he dove to the side.

Holly mentally tracked the spell, still not taking her eyes off of Debello, not even for a second. The Ravenclaw, in turn, seemed to be momentarily frozen, suggesting that at least one of her spells had nailed him. Her senses registered the fact that Justin had dodged the Reductor, and she gave a soft sigh of relief.

“What do you think you’re playing at?” the Hufflepuff shouted angrily as he picked himself up off of the floor. He didn’t wait for a reply, instead choosing to furiously storm from the Hall.

Professor Snape growled and immediately turned on Debello, jerking the still frozen boy off of the stage forcefully. He was enraged that the Ravenclaw would dare send such an advanced and dangerous spell at one of his own, especially considering that she was a second-year. It didn’t matter that she could block it, a feat most sixth and seventh-years would have problems with given the strengths of their shields. Even though it was a very elementary skill, it was one most couldn’t do, especially not with the shoddy Defence professors they’d had.

There was now ominous muttering throughout the Great Hall, and quite a number of the older students were looking at Holly strangely. She felt Blaise come up behind her, grasping her elbow as he led her off the stage and out of the room. As they went, students jumped out of their way. The older Slytherins looked at her curiously but gave her satisfied nods.

The group of second-years plus Luna and Gavin departed to the dungeons.

(End of flashback)

I must say, I'm impressed, Holly. Tom informed her after she recounted the incident at the Duelling Club. *It isn't often that people manage to make shields, especially one strong enough to block a Reductor. It's actually a very powerful spell for being lower level.*

She simply sighed. *Well, I couldn't move fast enough to duck out of the way, and I didn't fancy being blown to bits.* She shook her head, running her hand over her face. *I didn't mean to deflect it at Justin.*

I understand completely. It isn't your fault; you just made the best of a bad situation.

She wrote tiredly, *Yes, but now everyone will think that I did it purposely.* She yawned into her free hand. *They'll think that I just outted myself as the Heir of Slytherin.*

Tom paused for a moment, his mind swirling strangely. *They will most likely, completely ignoring the fact that it was Debello who sent the curse at you in the first place... and the fact that he could have very well killed you with it had you not blocked.*

Holly exhaled, her hand trembling on the page. *I know.*

At least, Professor Snape put an end to the duel, Tom inserted himself quickly, trying to keep her from dwelling, which was something of a problem for her. *From what you have told me of him, I suspect that he'll punish the aggressor rather harshly. Perhaps even try to expel him.*

They lapsed into stillness for a moment before the dark-haired girl quietly scribbled, *But this still won't help my case any. Everyone will still think that I just attempted to harm Justin.*

Tom remained still, having no way to refute her claim. He knew that her statement was nothing but the truth.

Sure enough, Holly was right. The episode with the Duelling Club did serve to make the other students even more skittish around her, and the events of the following afternoon did not help her either.

Outside classes had been cancelled due to the blizzard that was currently blowing snow all over Hogwarts' grounds. The Hufflepuff second-years, who should have been in the greenhouses for Herbology, were in library instead. Noticing this, Holly had gone over to explain what had truly happened the night before. However, their words caused her to pause and hover by the Invisibility section. Several minutes passed, all the while the green-eyed girl was listening to their hurtful accusations and their absolute certainty that she was in fact the Heir of Slytherin. Not only that, but they thought her to be an evil Dark Lady on the rise and that Voldemort had targeted her as a baby so that he wouldn't have competition in the future.

Afterwards, fighting the urge to appear before them, Holly slipped away. She stalked down the corridor, filled with hurt and shame. She was so occupied she nearly ran into Hagrid, whose mental presence she belatedly noticed. Chastising herself for her stupidity, she spoke to him, carefully avoiding any mention of her ire. Not that the man had even noticed.

Saying goodbye, she promptly stretched out her mind, only to run into a rather bizarre feeling that was emanating from the corridor directly above her. Curiosity filling her, Holly walked up the stairs at the end of the hallway and discreetly brought her wand to her hand as she stepped around the corner.

The sight that greeted her was one she was certain would come back to haunt her.

Justin Flinch-Fletchley was on the floor, completely ridged, an apparent Petrification victim. Additionally, Sir Nicholas, the Gryffindor ghost, was floating just above the ground. The spectre was almost completely opaque, and she belatedly noticed that his head was part-way off.

Holly clapped her hands over her mouth, stilling the scream that was now trapped in her throat. She wildly glanced around the corridor, seeing nothing else. Her mind registered only the presences of people in the surrounding classrooms.

She stepped to one of the classroom's door to summon help, but a chilling thought stilled her. If she told them, everyone would most definitely think her the culprit. Yet, she couldn't just leave them there. The Slytherin hesitated for a moment, deciding that she did need to tell someone and that it wasn't like Justin and Nicholas were going anywhere if she didn't immediately act. Searching her mind, Holly almost instantly knew who she could go to, and his office wasn't very far away.

Holly dashed down the hallway and around the corner, just as her mind registered Peeves approaching from the other end. She hurried down another corridor and a flight of stairs, running all the way to Professor Flitwick's office without even pausing. Luckily, the short teacher was there, and she quickly told him of her discovery. The Charms professor hopped from his seat and rushed off, arriving just as Peeves started yelling about another attack.

It was almost an hour later, a time in which Holly remained in Professor Flitwick's office just as he had asked her to, when McGonagall arrived. The deputy headmistress gave her several searching glances as the two of them headed for Dumbledore's office, the gargoyle jumping out of the way and the woman ushering her up the stairs. The girl was sent inside alone to wait for the headmaster. She passed the time by talking with the Sorting Hat, which assured her that she was in the correct House but would say nothing more. Feeling relieved but slightly disgruntled, she wandered over to the sickly looking bird perched near Dumbledore's desk.

The mental presence of the bird, which she belatedly realised was a phoenix, was not unlike that of a human, indicating that he was sentient. However, it was weak, signifying that poor the thing was probably near death. The fact that the creature burst into flames right around the time that thought crossed Holly's mind was more than enough proof that she was correct. It was also at that moment that the headmaster chose to enter, smiling as he saw his little Slytherin gazing with amazement at the diminutive chick emerging from Fawkes' ashes.

The following conversation remained a fixture of Holly's thoughts for several days but a good one at that. Dumbledore once more probed her mind, the girl pushing her innocence to the forefront of her thoughts and shielding everything else. The headmaster mentally nodded to himself afterwards, beaming as she took the offered lemon drop. He quickly moved on to talk about Fawkes, who Holly seemed to be rather fascinated by, and dropped the other matter completely. After a rather long discussion about the phoenix and his species in general, Dumbledore gently led her to the door, squeezing her shoulder briefly and sending her on her way.

The next few days passed in a not-so-pleasant blur for Holly as she was rapidly becoming even more annoyed with the hisses, pointing, and insults she received from the other students. Her Housemates were rather enraged by the entire mess, glaring at the perpetrators and subtly hexing a few of them when their backs were turned. Most of her friends found the entire thing to be a source of great aggravation, the twins being the only exception. In fact, Fred and George seemed to find it quite amusing and had taken to walking down the corridors in front of Holly, occasionally shouting, "Make way for the Heir of Slytherin, seriously evil witch coming through." However, they stopped after Draco had threatened to rearrange their body parts, informing them that their behaviour was not helping.

All in all, it was with great relief that Holly counted down the days until she could leave for Yule break, heading to Blaise's home for the holiday. Nevertheless, the night before the train ride arrived, and she still had one last task in front of her before she could leave.

Holly and Draco were sitting in one of the oft used Slytherin study rooms, facing one another. Blaise and Luna were just outside the closed door, supposedly guarding it. However, Holly knew they were really there for moral support and damage control should Draco take what she was about to tell him badly. They had actually wanted to be inside with her, but Holly had argued that it was probably best to do this one-on-one, especially if things didn't go well. She did not want them to have to choose between their friends.

Fighting the urge to fidget nervously, she met Draco's searching gaze, giving him a small smile.

"So," she began, "you're probably wondering why I brought you here and what is with all the secrecy."

Draco blinked. "The thought had crossed my mind." He again looked at her, seeing her smile falter. Noticing her nervous state, he patted her hand.

"You can tell me, Holly. Whatever it is, you can tell me. You know that, don't you?"

She exhaled slowly. "Yes, I know. It is somewhat difficult, though." The girl paused, taking a deep breath.

It was now or never.

"I'm a Mind Mage, a telepath more specifically," she stated, surprised but rather pleased with how calm she sounded.

Grey eyes blinked, and Draco seemed to be deep in thought. "Oh. That's... that's rather interesting. I don't have a problem with it," he hurriedly assured her, squeezing her hand. "I'm a follower of the Old Ways, so no worries there. Actually, I suspected that you might be, but I wasn't sure if you knew. Some people don't even realise it for what it is." He paused, thinking it over. "This does seem to explain a great deal." The boy whispered more to himself than to her, "It all makes sense now."

Not really expecting that response, Holly questioned, "What makes sense?"

His gaze snapped to her. "All the little hints were there the entire time. The glances you share with Blaise, ones where you seem to speak to him without saying anything. The incident when we first spoke to Tom; the mind that brushed mine was yours," he replied after a moment.

"Yes, that was me," she admitted. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to do it. I was just trying to reassure you. It was completely instinctual. I promise not to go deeper than surface thoughts without your permission again," Holly apologised quickly.

Draco rubbed his thumb over her fingers. "It's fine, Hols. I know you; you wouldn't snoop without permission unless it was unintentional or an emergency." He gave her a charming smile. "Don't worry about it. I know what to expect now. I didn't before, which was why I reacted badly." He held up his free hand to still her next apology. "I said it was fine. You don't need to apologise again."

The girl heaved an audible sigh of relief. "Thank you."

She didn't even have to say what it was for. He already knew.

"No problem," the blond responded, pausing as he thought of something. "I take it that Blaise knows then?" At her affirmative nod, he carried on, "Luna, too. She's a Mind Mage as well, isn't she?" He clarified, "It would explain why you were so drawn to her."

Holly shifted in her seat, having already been told by the Ravenclaw that it was fine to tell Draco about her also. "She is."

The blond seemed to be considering her statement. "No one else knows though... about either you or her. Well, her father probably knows, but not the staff or our other friends?" he questioned.

"We haven't told anyone else." Holly stated carefully, "Blaise has known since last year; he was the first one I ever told. I would have told you, but--"

"But we had our little disagreement and weren't exactly on the best of terms," he finished for her. "I don't blame you for not telling me then,

but I appreciate that you're telling me now. Thank you for trusting me with this," Draco whispered sincerely, interlacing their fingers.

"You're welcome," she added, flushing slightly.

He raised an eyebrow but didn't comment on it.

Instead, he chose to ask, "Are you ever going to tell the others?"

She faltered slightly. "Eventually, but I wanted to tell you first. Milli and Theo will probably be next. Maybe Gavin with them. I'm still not sure about the others. They're my friends, but I still don't know."

"And Tom?" he queried faintly, silvery-grey eyes looking at her with interest.

"Tom," she started, "I plan to tell Tom but not until we can be sure of him. You can never be too careful about such things," Holly added thoughtfully.

It was with great relief and a lighter heart that she boarded the train the next day. Draco had wished her a very Happy Christmas, actually kissing her on the cheek before she left, making her flush lightly. He had also given her firm instructions to enjoy her holiday.

The trip itself seemed to fly by to Holly, who was excitedly playing Exploding Snap with Gavin, Theo, and Milli, while Blaise and Luna had a fierce chess match. For once, she was actually looking forward to the holidays, quite a change from usual.

Soon enough, the train pulled into the station, the group stepping off to find their families. Luna drifted off to her father, dragging Holly and Blaise with her so that they could be properly introduced. After a brief conversation, the Slytherin girl waved and wandered over with Blaise to his parents. Erendiria instantly descended upon the pair, losing most of her sense of decorum and hugging them tightly. Dante followed close behind her, also hugging both children and surprising Holly rather thoroughly.

After an exchange of pleasantries, Dante shrunk and pocketed the two trunks, Eren leading them all to the barrier and passing through. They exited the station and walked to the wizarding shop they had used in September, Flooing to Zabini Manor. There, they were immediately beset upon by Blaise's two sisters, Alexandria and Isabella. The two girls promptly attached themselves to Holly and refused to let go for half an hour. It was during that time that Navi, the house-elf who had been assigned to the Holly during the summer, appeared and then promptly disappeared with her now unshrunk trunk. Undoubtedly, the helpful house-elf had taken it to the room the girl had been in during her last stay, a fact that Holly verified when she finally managed to extricate herself from the youngest Zabinis and make her way upstairs.

Her room really was the same, the one directly across the hall from Blaise's bedroom. Thoughtfully, Navi was in the process of unpacking her things, placing her books on the shelves, and putting her clothes in the wardrobe. Holly thanked the small being, the house-elf beaming at the praise and inquiring if there was anything else she could do for "the little mistress." Not having anything else to do, the house-elf popped away but not before flinging her little arms around the girl and welcoming her back home.

Apparently, Holly had been greatly missed.

The time before Christmas flew by for Holly. The two Slytherins finished their holiday work within the first two days so that they would not have to worry about it later. Afterwards, Holly and Blaise enjoyed their free time, actually spending a good portion of it with the other family members. They had tea parties and read stories with the Zabini girls, much to the exceptional delight of Alexandria and Isabella, not to mention their parents. Additionally, they talked for hours with Eren and Dante, covering topics ranging from the latest gossip in the Ministry to the most recent discoveries in Charms, Dante's field of choice.

It was here that Holly confessed the current goings-on at Hogwarts, filling them in on the Heir and her supposed connection to it all. Thankfully, however, the adult Zabinis dismissed the rumours as

nothing but nonsense, assuring Holly that they didn't believe her to be attacking other students.

Also, during this time, the two students both continuously communicated with Tom, though Holly admittedly wrote more often as she talked with her diary companion at night, long after the rest of the household was asleep. The girl wrote to him about her day, the excitement of the holiday, and whatever happened to be on her mind at the moment.

Yet, not all of their topics were pleasant. In fact, one in particular was very disturbing to the young Slytherin.

Tom had been encouraging her to tell Blaise the truth about the Dursleys for some time now, and he was becoming more insistent with each passing day. The older boy informed her that it was past time for her to share, privately believing that if she were to ever get over her childhood, she needed to share it those she was closest to. Starting with her best friend.

It was on Christmas Eve that Holly finally and very reluctantly gave in to his resolve, having known all along that it was time but still refusing to believe until then. And so, that evening, right after Eren and Dante had kissed them goodnight, the small girl snuck across the hall to her friend's bedroom.

"Come in," Blaise called softly, hearing her knock. The boy put Tom's diary, in which he had been writing, on his bedside table and glanced up. He started when he saw who it was, especially after he noted the nervous twitch of her lips and blankness of her eyes.

"Holly, what's wrong?" The caramel-skinned boy pushed back his covers and climbed out of bed, going to her.

"Nothing," she responded a bit too quickly. At his disbelieving look, she conceded, "Well, nothing really bad. I just... I... I have something to tell you." She paused as he led her to the edge of the bed and gestured for her to sit, and not knowing what else to do, she simply stated, "It's about the Dursleys."

His head snapped up. "Oh... is this what I think it is? I mean," he clarified, "is it time for that conversation we've been putting off?"

Holly merely nodded; she didn't need to be a mind-reader to know what he meant.

Blaise exhaled very slowly. "I suspect that this will take time then. Might as well make ourselves comfortable." He leaned to the side and pulled his covers down even further before he crawled over and then under them. He propped up two pillows side by side. Adjusting himself and leaning back on one, he pointedly nodded at her and patted the spot beside him.

She gave him a strange look, not at all certain what he wanted her to do.

"Well, come on. Get in." He patted the spot beside him again, and she hesitantly crawled underneath the covers.

Part of her treacherous mind was silently cheering, telling her how nice this was, but the majority was slightly nervous, making Holly distinctly uncomfortable. Blaise, however, was completely unfazed, reclining easily and looking at her. She couldn't help but wonder what would happen if one of the house-elves or, Maker forbid, his parents saw them in bed together.

As if reading her mind, he stated, "Don't worry if anyone happens to catch us. Lexie and Belle often crawl in bed with me at night. No one will think anything of it." Blaise neglected to mention the fact that normally his sisters only slept with him if they had had a nightmare; he didn't think that little bit of information would help this situation.

"So," he began after a moment.

But she remained silent.

"So the Dursleys," he prompted again.

She stiffened.

He sighed. "If you still aren't ready, it's fine, Hols. You don't have to--"

She cut him off, “No, I... I’m ready. I’m just not sure where to start.”

Dark-brown eyes blinked. “How about the beginning?” he supplied helpfully.

Holly gave him a grim smile and started just where he had suggested. She was hesitant at first, not sure how much she should tell him or what amount of detail she should do it in. However, once she started, she just couldn’t stop. It was like a poison was being drawn from her, and each little bit, each detail, each hurtful truth, only brought more relief.

It was different than telling Tom. For one, she shared common ground with the diary-wizard. For another, she didn’t have to look at him, feel his hand squeeze hers tightly as she spoke to him.

However, no matter how strange and difficult it was, Holly told Blaise everything, the entire hurtful experience. She told him of the Dursleys’ neglect, her not-too-uncommon punishments, and how she was treated as a house-elf, and not in the good way that the Zabinis treated their house-elves. She told him almost everything, up to and including the previous summer.

And after what seemed like hours, and probably was, she finally fell silent.

Blaise simply stared at her, still processing. A minute passed and then two... with Holly looking at him from beneath her eyelashes, too afraid to reach out for his mind to glimpse his thoughts. And suddenly, he unfroze, and the boy all but threw his arms around her, squeezing her within an inch of her life. Holly heaved a huge sigh of relief, or at least, she would have had she been able to breathe.

Seeing her distress, the boy eased up but refused to let go, burying his face in her hair and holding on for dear life. “I’m so sorry, Hols,” he whispered to her. “I’m so very sorry you had to live through that; you’ll never know how sorry I am, but I’ll try to make it up to you. I promise, *amorcita*.”

Holly, who had stiffened at the overt affection, relaxed at the last part. She sniffled and curled into their embrace.

They stayed like that for several long moments before he finally pulled back, his hands still on her arms.

“So what’re you going to do?” he asked silently, after gazing at her for a minute.

Holly looked confused. “Do?” Her emerald eyes were suspiciously moist.

“About the Dursleys, *amorcita*?” he prompted, squeezing her gently.

Her eyebrows furrowed. “Nothing. Nothing at all. I mean, what can I do? It’s all in the past now.”

Blaise’s eyes widened. “Holly... Hols... what they did to you was criminal!” he stated with emphasis. “They could go to jail; they **should** go to jail.” He looked her directly in the eyes. “They abused you, Holly?”

She stiffened. “They don’t do it anymore, so what does it matter? They’re too afraid! Even after they found out I couldn’t do magic out of school, they were still fearful. They thought that I would tell if they tried to do it again,” the girl informed him tightly, an undercurrent of bitterness in her voice. “And besides, I need them. Remember the blood protections I told you about; they’ll fail if I don’t stay with Petunia.”

Blaise growled. “I am beginning to think that you’ll be better off without the **protection** Petunia and her ilk offer you, Holly.” He sighed in frustration as she blinked back moisture. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think you should ever return, regardless of the wards. There has to be a better way to protect you. We just have to find it,” he assured her, willing her to believe him. His eyes were suspiciously bright.

The girl nodded absentmindedly, not really listening. She lowered her head, her unbound hair falling forward to cover her face and her increasingly wet eyes.

“What’s wrong, Hols? I know you’re upset about them, and I can’t blame you for that,” the boy allowed weakly, sniffing. “But there is something else, isn’t there? Some other reason you think you need to

go back?" he asked gently, lifting her chin. "You can tell me anything, Holly," Blaise stated with emotion, stroking his hand through her hair like. "You don't have to hide anything. You don't have to bottle it up inside."

Holly fought the urge to sob, barely winning. "It's just... Dumbledore told me that the wards were based on my mother's love for me and that staying with her blood, Petunia, strengthened it. But you see, Petunia, she never..." the Slytherin paused for a moment but the words kept coming. "I mean, she never cared for me, never loved me at all. So how can they still work?"

Blaise looked at her bleakly and was about to comment, but she cut him off.

"And I wanted her to... I wanted them to love me. I wanted them to love me so badly, and they never did. They still don't."

A tear came then, just one, but it was more than she had allowed in a long time, almost six years, in fact.

"Or maybe," she continued, steadfastly looking anywhere but at Blaise, "maybe I just wanted someone... **anyone** to love me."

Now that she had confessed about the Dursleys, it was so much easier to admit her other fears.

"Maybe it didn't matter who; I just need someone. Maybe the wards don't really matter at all compared to that."

"And you do," Blaise whispered, and she finally looked at him. "You do, Hols," he repeated, cupping her face again. "You're the best friend I've ever had. I can tell you anything... anything at all, and I know without a doubt that you can be trusted with it. You're there whenever I need it. I can depend on you for anything, and I..." He faltered then, wiping away at his eyes and sniffing. "You know that I love you, don't you, Holly?" he asked suddenly, but he didn't wait for a response. "I know that I never said so before, but I do. I love you, Holly."

She was speechless, her mouth actually hanging open and green eyes incredibly wide. Instinctively, she reached out with her mind, sensing that he was telling her nothing but the truth. And she was surprised that she had missed it before, the feeling was so strong, far stronger than the emotion Petunia felt for Dudley.

But Holly couldn't recall ever having someone direct it at her, so perhaps she simply hadn't realised it. What she had thought was simple friendship was much deeper than she ever imagined.

She carefully felt the bond between them, realising for the first time how very strong their connection actually was. She'd never had a bond with anyone before, at least not that she remembered, so Holly hadn't really known how to gauge it.

Now, she did. Now, she knew it for what it really was, for how strong it was.

"You're my best friend," Blaise went on, feeling her in his thoughts. His eyes were very red.

"My family loves you. My parents feel like you are their long-lost daughter. Belle and Lexie are so happy to have an older sister. They've known you for less than a year, but they love as much as they love me." He smiled then, trying to force her to believe him, not that he needed to now. "Luna loves you; she has known you for three months, and she already looks at you as if you're the most important thing in the entire world. The other Slytherins love you, Draco included. By Circe, the spirit of a trapped sixth-year is one of your best friends. He'll probably love you soon, too, if he doesn't already." He indicated the open diary. "And he's a book, for the Maker's sake."

Blaise stopped speaking, breathing hard from the long monologue.

Holly was still speechless.

After Blaise caught his breath, he whispered, "You don't need anyone to love you because people already do. That isn't the problem, but that's not to say that there isn't one."

She sniffled at his words, mutely shaking her head.

“Yes, Hols, there is a problem. I think that you really want to return so you can punish yourself.”

And her head snapped up.

“You have a tendency to blame yourself for things, Holly, things that aren’t your fault. And we’ll have to work on that, but that isn’t your current problem.” He lifted a hand to stop her vehemently denial. “No, your current problem is that you have never allowed yourself to grieve for your parents. You’ve never really let yourself cry because they’re gone, because they left you behind to live with those... **things**.”

She was to the point of tears now, and Blaise’s words pushed her over the edge.

“Nothing else can help you until you do. You need to let yourself grieve,” he asserted with finality, no longer having to shed her tears for her.

And Holly did. She grieved for her parents as she had never been able to before and for the life she could have had with them. She grieved for her lost childhood, something she was already leaving behind her and could never get back. But most of all, she grieved for herself, for the lot in life she was given and the unfairness of it all.

She simply cried, and Blaise wept with her, his head bowed over hers.

And afterwards, after she had cried for what seemed like hours, hours in which Blaise stayed by her side the entire time... she finally drifted off into a peaceful slumber, the diary still open on his bedside table. Its occupant’s mind turning over the conversation he had overheard.

Amorcita: Little love

AN: In case you guys/girls were wondering... yes, that does mean that Tom can hear conversations when the diary is open. This is another one of the chapters that I am unsure about, so it might eventually be rewritten.

To those that reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Nineteen: Betrayal is in the Eyes of the Beholder

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Nineteen: Betrayal is in the Eyes of the Beholder

The next morning Holly woke with a start, her eyes snapping open to stare at an unfamiliar wall. She glanced around, taking in the strange sights, ones she had never woken up with before. At the back of her mind she could feel the tingles of another person, but her thoughts were too fogged to really realise that fact. The girl blinked sleepily and rolled onto her back, her hand brushing her bangs from her face.

After a moment, her mind woke fully. The entire night before, and the confession she had made to Blaise, came rushing back.

Belatedly, she turned to look at her friend, who was still lying beside her.

He was staring straight back at her.

And when he noticed that she was awake and looking at him, Blaise gave her a small smile. "Good morning." A dark-brown eye winked.

Holly blinked again, heat creeping into her cheeks. "Er... good morning."

The boy sat up and stretched. "Did you sleep well?"

She simply nodded, remaining quiet.

A few moments passed in silence before Holly finally sat up, carefully not looking at him. She pulled back the covers and made to crawl out of bed, but his hand on her wrist stopped her.

"Look, Holly," he began.

Her head whipped around, but her eyes still refused to meet his.

"If you are embarrassed about last night... well, don't be. I am glad that you told me, that you trusted me enough to tell me." Blaise patted her arm.

The girl finally glanced up. "Thank you."

She didn't have to say what it was for.

The boy simply grinned and nodded, sliding off of his bed. "We'd best be off then. I expect Lexie and Belle will soon be up and wanting to open presents," he said, coming around to her side. He gave her a helping hand up.

Holly froze for a second, processing what he had just said. "That's right! It's Christmas!" she murmured to herself, wondering how she could have possibly forgotten.

Blaise laughed, putting on his dressing gown. He followed in her wake as she darted to her room, telling her not to bother getting properly dressed. If she did, she'd be the only one.

After also throwing on her own dressing gown, Holly and Blaise descended to the ground floor. They first checked the kitchen, and finding it empty, they strolled into the parlour just in time to intercept two small blurs, one blonde and the other brunette.

Alexandria smiled up at Holly from near her waist, her tiny arms hugging the older girl tightly as the Slytherin did her best to keep from falling over. After she had righted them both, Holly grinned back, noticing out of the corner of her eye that Blaise and Isabella were in a similar embrace. Laughter from the side of the room caught the green-eyed Slytherin's attention, her gaze flickering over to the Christmas tree and the two people sitting beside it.

"We were just about to send Navi to wake you two," Eren informed them with a wink, waving them inside. "However, Lexie and Belle insisted that they should go, but I see there's no need for that now." She gestured that the older pair plus their hangers-on should sit on the floor with her husband and her.

"Really, Mum? I hadn't expected that you would be up yet," Blaise replied from his position on the floor, pulling Holly down with him.

"Yes, well, Belle woke up earlier than usual," Dante supplied, ruffling his oldest daughter's hair. "And she insisted that we go ahead and open presents. Isn't that right, dear?" he asked the girl.

She merely nodded, abandoning Blaise for her father and laying her head on his shoulder as she wrapped her hands around his arm.

Alexandria, who refused to desert Holly despite her father's explicit invitation, began to play with the Slytherin's hair. Both Eren and Blaise covered their grins with their hands in very similar gestures.

"Since everyone is now here," Eren put in, "we should begin." She turned to Holly. "As it is your first Yule with us, would you like to hand out presents? We normally take turns."

The others nodded their agreement with this suggestion, settling back with anticipation. The two Zabini girls were practically vibrating with their enthusiasm.

Holly started. She had never been directly involved in a Yule celebration before except the previous year. However, that didn't really count as she had merely sat on the sidelines, while an older student handed out gifts.

Looking up, Holly realised that the Zabinis were waiting for a reply. "Well... yes." She glanced around as though searching for someone. "What about the house-elves?"

Blaise quickly assured her, "Oh, they don't celebrate Yule. They had their holy holiday last month. They'll join us for breakfast afterwards though; it's tradition."

Holly inclined her head before she finally scooted to the tree, pausing to remember that they had decorated it the day after Blaise and she had returned. The event, which had been quite the eye-opener to the girl as she had never done anything like it before, was now firmly rooted in her mind as one of her happiest memories. She distinctly recalled Eren and Dante adding real icicles to the branches along with an assortment of odd ornaments. She remembered the youngest Zabinis insisting that she sprinkle fairy dust with them, liberal amounts of it magically getting onto their hair and clothes. Holly even recollected adding tinsel with Blaise, the ornaments cleverly pointing out when they added too much to one side. Finally, she recalled the crowning moment, when they had levitated the star to the very top.

Shaking her head to dispel the recollection, Holly moved the rest of the way to the evergreen, but she once again hesitated, not entirely sure what to do. She had never participated during the Dursley

Christmases, normally spending the holiday locked in her cupboard, only being let out to cook. Still, she had her experience from the previous year to draw upon, so she hesitantly began to look at the tags.

Soon enough, everything was with its proper person, but no one had started opening. They seemed to be waiting until Holly was finished so that she could begin with the rest of them. Yet, as soon as the Slytherin girl settled back in the group with her own pile of gifts, Isabella and Alexandria started to fidget. Eren merely chuckled before indicating that they should go ahead. Calmly, they each picked up a present, announced who it was from, and then sedately but still excitedly removed the wrapping.

The others all smiled but followed suit.

Faster than Holly had thought possible, everything was opened, including her things. She had received gifts from all of her friends, even the Gryffindors. She had books from the majority of her mates, including the twins, Remus, and Luna. Most of the books seemed to fit into one of two categories: something Defence related or something that covered ancient legends and artefacts, including the Chamber of Secrets. The only exceptions were the gifts from Ron and Hermione. Ron had sent a book about the Canons, a team that Holly was beginning to loathe, and Hermione one on evil magic users. Perhaps it was her way of asking the Slytherin to confess.

Still, Holly had gotten things other than books. From Cynthia, she received sheet music to go along with her flute, a gift from Hagrid the previous year. Pansy sent lovely gloves, scarf, hat, and matching cloak, all of which were exceptionally soft and were spelled to keep her warm and dry. Draco gave her a writing set complete with deluxe eagle-feather quills, colourful ink, and new parchment. Undoubtedly, he meant it as an oblique gift to both Tom and her as she wrote to the diary so often that she had run out of ink and used up most of her quills. Hagrid sent her a large tin of treacle fudge and Mrs. Weasley one of her trademark sweaters.

Not surprisingly, the various members of the Zabini family also gave her presents. Alexandria and Isabella got her a complete set of

magical children's tales, apparently remembering her awe of them during her summer visit. Dante and Eren, who had noticed the way Holly tended to squint when she read, sent her a new pair of wire-framed glasses, which "suit your face so well, dear" and would magically adjust to her eyesight when she put them on. Additionally, the Zabini parents gave her new Quidditch gloves, a set of bottle green robes, and a few other odds and ends.

Yet, no matter how thoughtful and wonderful everyone's gift, it was Blaise's that she loved the best.

It had been quite a surprise when she had lifted the top off of the box to his present, only to see her parents' smiling and happy faces. She blinked confusedly for several moments, attempting to process what she was seeing before it finally dawned on her. It was a photo of her parents. Not only that, but it was a framed photo of an exceptionally excited James and a very pregnant Lily.

Holly dragged her eyes from the scene of her father rubbing his hand on Lily's rounded belly and gaped at Blaise. "Where did you--"

He smiled sheepishly. "From Hagrid. I asked who he had contacted to get the pictures for your album. One of them, Andromeda Tonks, founded some photos among her cousin's things and sent it. He was apparently one of their friends, but I think he's dead now."

Holly simply kept staring at him, her mouth slightly open.

"You like it, don't you?" Blaise asked worriedly.

"I love it."

And she threw her arms around him in a fierce embrace; he belatedly hugged her back

From the side, Dante and Eren Zabini exchanged a wink.

Breakfast afterwards was a happy affair. For once, the house-elves joined them and actually sat at the table, a strange thing considering the little beings' ideas of propriety. Holly sat between Alexandria, who was still somewhat attached to the older girl, and Navi, who seemed

be slightly scandalised and was clearly uncomfortable at the table. Blaise was across from them, his other sister to his right and more house-elves to his left. Throughout the entire meal, he beamed at her from across the table, still pleased by Holly's reaction to his gift.

Once they were finished, Holly was dragged off to play a game with the two Zabini girls. Blaise, however, didn't join them.

A half an hour later, a slightly puzzled Holly climbed down the stairs and headed for the kitchen, his last known location. She was about to open the strangely closed door when the sound of her name stilled her.

"Did she have a nightmare last night?" Eren inquired, and there was the scrape of a chair as she sat down.

Blaise's voice was filled with confusion. "No, Mum. Why do you ask?"

"I saw her sleeping in your bed."

Both Slytherins froze.

"What?" the boy asked with ill-hidden horror.

Eren exhaled softly. "Last night, Navi came to me. She said that Holly wasn't in her room; don't ask me how she knew. So I went to check, and when I couldn't find her, I went to yours."

"Why would you go there?" Blaise questioned, trying to salvage the situation.

"I figured that she had probably had a nightmare. With her past I couldn't blame her. She would go to you if she did, and Belle and Lexie always stay with you afterwards when they do," she explained carefully, not sounding accusatory in the slightest. Eren simply sounded worried, like she thought something bad had happened and had caused Holly to seek comfort.

"No, it wasn't a nightmare. It was... it was something else," he finished. "I'm sorry, but it's personal. She just now got up the courage to tell me."

Eren was silent for a second. "It must have been a very painful thing for her to seek you out like that," she concluded. "It's good that you helped her."

"You aren't mad?" Blaise queried hopefully.

Eren laughed lightly. "Not in the least. I was merely worried about Holly." Her chair scraped as she rose. "I trust you, Blaise; I don't have to worry about any improprieties. I know how you feel about her."

Holly heard Eren kiss her son.

The girl smiled sweetly and turned away from the door. She briskly walked up the stairs and back to her game. She didn't need to listen anymore; she had heard enough.

It was with great sadness a day later that Holly and Blaise packed their school things. Dante had received an urgent owl not an hour earlier from his nephew. The health of his widowed sister had taken a dreadful turn, and the ten-year-old had not known who else to ask for help. As a result, Dante, Eren, and the Zabini girls were travelling to Spain the next day to care for her. Holly and Blaise would not be going with them as there was no telling how long it would be. Instead, the two Slytherins were returning early to Hogwarts.

To say that Holly was extremely disappointed was an understatement, and as bad as she felt for Dante's sister, the green-eyed girl couldn't help but hate the woman's timing. The Slytherin had been having the time of her life, and now, she was leaving early. Not only that, but Blaise and she had not yet had the opportunity to research the summoning ritual for her parents. Without Dante's books, it seemed as though they wouldn't be able to do it.

However, Blaise luckily had a solution to their problem

"Cheer up, mate," he told her as he helped her pack her things into her trunk. "We can research it during the summer. We'll have more time then anyway. I know that we will miss Beltane, but we can do it on the next Samhain instead. Besides, it is more likely to work then." He patted her back before tucking a book along the side of her trunk.

Holly nodded. "Thank you," she whispered, folding her new robes.

He winked and added more of her books. Unexpectedly, Blaise frowned, trying to stuff the things in. They wouldn't fit.

Holly sighed. "I guess that I'll have to ask your parents to expand it even further, though I am not sure how much more than it can given the stability of this thing." She tapped her trunk, a "gift" from the Dursleys.

Blaise made as if to nod, but he hesitated. "Why don't you just leave a few things here?" he suggested. "I don't take all my belongings with me."

That was certainly true.

Holly blinked and opened her mouth. She then promptly shut it, making a neutral sound. She certainly could leave her things here, the Zabini probably wouldn't mind. Yet, it was different if Blaise did it. He lived here; it was his home. If she started permanently leaving her things here, it basically amounted to declaring that she had the right to do so.

Another moment passed in silence, brown eyes studying her. He gazed at Holly, as if willing her to do as he suggested.

She was toying with the cover of some nameless book, thinking it over.

The girl glanced at him. "Will your parents mind?"

The caramel-skinned boy didn't even hesitate. "Not in the least." He gave her a sheepish shrug. "They were actually the ones that brought it up to me. They wanted me to suggest it to you when I asked to stay for the summer again."

"Summer?" she repeated.

He had referenced when he had mentioned the summoning ritual, but the way he made it sound now... well, it seemed like his parents wanted her to spend the entire holiday with them.

"The entire time?"

"They would love it if you would," Blaise responded happily. "I explained that you had to go to the Dursleys for a while first." A dark scowl tugged at his lips at the mention of her relatives. "I didn't say why," he assured Holly, at her questioning sniff. "But they're smart. I think that they'll soon figure it out. They already know that the headmaster insists you return, even if you aren't happy there."

Holly distractedly toyed with her unbound hair, turning back to look at her things. Her mind was whirling with the implications of what Blaise had said. Apparently, his family truly didn't mind her intrusion. The thought of actually being wanted, of having someone wish her presence, brought a genuine grin to her face.

More minutes passed, and it was just as Blaise was becoming increasingly nervous that she spoke.

"Sure," Holly said finally, and she began to take things out of her trunk.

She now had to decide what to take and what to leave.

Eren dropped them off at school the next morning. She left after a hug and kiss to each of them, giving both firm instructions to write. The pair watched as she disappeared at the gate, apparently having Apparated, before they opened the door to the Entrance Hall and levitated their trunks to the dungeons.

It was a very surprised Draco who spotted them as they entered the Common Room. The blond gave his condolences after they had explained before proceeding to tell them exactly they had missed at Hogwarts. Not much, but Greg and Vincent had had a strange experience with mysteriously appearing cakes after Christmas dinner. The floating deserts had been left outside the Great Hall, but the two boys had been sceptical about eating them, especially after they had noticed that Neville and Ron were lurking about.

Of course, that aside had led to other occurrence during the holiday: the bizarre behaviour of Hermione, Ron, and Neville. The Gryffindor

trio had been prowling around the remaining Slytherins, not approaching them and merely watching. It was as if the three were waiting for something.

Holly was understandably disturbed by this information. The three Gryffindors had long suspected her to be guilty of attacking her fellow students. This fact coupled with their actions toward Autumn, where they had warned her away from Holly, and she had come to a rather startling conclusion. It seemed as though her friends were now looking for evidence against her, and they were hoping that the other Slytherins knew something. They were simply waiting for the others to give it away, and Holly was afraid to the lengths they would go to find out.

Two days later, she had her answer.

That evening, Holly and Draco were sitting in the Common Room, the only Slytherins currently there. The few upper-years were off on their own, having a party in one of the dungeons. Blaise was in his dorm room, bathing. Greg and Vincent, their only remaining year-mates, were Muggle only knows where, doing Muggle only knows what.

The blond and the green-eyed girl were reading.

Holly was flipping through a book she had received for Christmas, one that was surprisingly from Luna. It was a fascinating read, detailing the Founders of Hogwarts and the various legends and magical artefacts that were attributed to them. It had an entire, albeit short, chapter discussing the Chamber of Secrets. Or rather, the text covered all the rumours, no matter how crazy and unfounded, that revolved around it. Additionally, the book mentioned the Lifestone, an interest of Holly's since the ill-fated History lesson months earlier.

According to the text, the Lifestone was an artefact of Helga Hufflepuff's and was created after the severe illness of her mother-in-law, Amia Hawthorne. The object was said to possess the ability to borrow life-energy and infuse it into others, prolonging their life. Further, an apparent side-effect of the relic was that it could absorb the abilities and even the knowledge of others, though it was unclear as to the how well it did. There were several other abilities attributed

to the object, but the reliability of the reports of those was somewhat sketchy.

The back entrance to the Common Room opened unexpectedly, and Holly looked up from her page, her gaze leaving the description of the Lifestone's linking abilities. Her eyes quickly informed her that it was only a third-year, Dimitri Dolohov, followed by Greg and Vincent.

However, her mental senses told her an entirely different story.

Dimitri was in fact who he appeared to be, and the girl dismissed him as he entered the corridor leading to the dorm rooms. Instead, all of her mental focus was on the other two, "Greg" and "Vincent." Her mind was screaming at her that something was wrong with the pair, that things weren't as they appeared. And for the life of her, Holly could not figure out why Greg's mind felt exactly like Neville's or Vincent felt like Ron.

It had to be some kind of trick. There had to be some sort of explanation, and the answer to her unvoiced question was inadvertently answered by Ron when he briefly prayed that the Polyjuice Potion would hold long enough for them to get answers.

She instantly felt a stab in her heart at the realisation of her friends' betrayal, and a blaze of anger shot through Holly. She had asked Titania about the potion after she had gleaned it from Hermione's mind several weeks ago. She was not happy by what she learned, but she had not actually thought the Gryffindors would actually use it. Holly had erroneously believed that they were not learning of it to brew, rather to prove that someone else was using it, perhaps to even implicate Holly herself in the Heir of Slytherin business.

That was obviously not the case. They had used it to impersonate her friends; they were going to interrogate Draco and her for information, just as their thoughts suggested. She fleetingly wondered where Hermione was and what her part in all of this had been.

Holly snapped back to herself when Neville coughed. All of her revelation had occurred in mere seconds, and green eyes flickered back to her book, not wanting to cause suspicion. She fought the

seething anger that was filling her, shoving it behind a mental door and vowing to deal with it later.

Internally, she sent Draco a mental poke, and his gaze instantly flickered to her. The girl inclined her head, her eyes going to Ron and Neville in their Slytherin guises. The pair was now sitting at the settee across from them.

"It's not really Vincent and Greg," Holly sent to the blond, and his eyes widened. "They're impostors. It's Ron and Neville under a potion. They think that I'm the Heir and that we might reveal information to them."

Draco's mind was whirling with the implication, and he was wondering what he should do.

"Don't say anything. Don't let them know," Holly thought quickly. "We can use this to our advantage. We can show that we don't know anything at all about it. If we confront them, then they'll only wonder how we knew and be even more suspicious"

'Just play along then?' he asked mentally, fighting the urge to stare at the other two.

Holly responded, "That's the idea, but let them broach the subject. I guess we should just keep at what we were doing."

Her eyes started to move across the page again, pretending to read. However, her mind reached out and focused on the intruders. Normally, she avoided reading the minds of others, especially her friends, but in this case, she was willing to make an exception.

Draco didn't reply; he simply turned the page that he had been staring at for the last minute. Ron and Neville shifted uncomfortably, obviously not sure how to begin their interrogation.

Minutes passed, Draco and Holly still pretending to ignore them, while the girl lightly ghosted through their minds. She attempted to discern what they knew, what they had based their suspicions on. Unfortunately, there wasn't much. In fact, it was all speculation,

guess-work, and it only served to send another wave of rage through her, one that she couldn't completely distance herself from.

Another minute passed, and Ron finally settled for the direct approach.

"So," he grunted in a distinctly non-Vincent voice that wasn't nearly deep enough. In fact, he really sounded like a baby Mandrake with a head cold.

"So what do you think about the Heir... Greg?" he addressed his companion, hoping that Holly and Draco would become involved in their conversation. "There haven't been any attacks in a while. D'you think there will be more?"

Neville started at being put on the spot, very uncomfortable with what they were doing. A fact that slightly cooled Holly's resentment.

"Er... maybe." He nervously fiddled with his robe, which was clearly not his as it was too large for his normal size. "Wh-what do you think, D-Draco?"

Both true Slytherins glanced up from their books.

"I don't know," the blond answered honestly enough. "Perhaps, but then, we don't really know why this is happening in the first place."

"We don't?" Ron questioned without thinking, something rather typical of him, wincing when Neville elbowed him in the ribs. "I mean... no, we don't." He frowned, oddly crinkling Vincent's nose. "What d'you think, Holly?"

The girl, who had anticipated the question, tried to keep her face neutral. "I don't know either," she replied, attempting to not say it through gritted teeth. "It doesn't make much sense that he or she was attacking Muggleborns in the first place." Holly figured that she might as well take the opportunity to clear her name.

Ron and Neville were taken aback, their minds whirling.

"Why?" fake-Greg asked.

“Well, considering the fact that there’re numerous Muggleborns in Slytherin,” she put in with a trace of satire, “it isn’t logical for the Heir to preach anti-Muggleborn sentiments.” She concluded carefully, “They’d eventually have to go against their own Housemates.”

Ron humphed. “Like they wouldn’t do that. It’s every man for himself among the Snakes,” he said to himself in a loud whisper. His thoughts showed that he clearly believed his pronouncement.

Holly frowned.

“No, we wouldn’t do that,” Draco inserted fiercely, rising immediately to defend his House. “We **do** have House loyalty, you know.” His silver eyes flashed. “What’s up with you?” he snapped unexpectedly, taking savage delight in seeing them put on the spot. “You should know better than to accuse us – **your own friends** – of such things.”

Ron shrugged lazily, the gesture looking very odd with Vincent’s heavier frame. He mumbled something that might have been a dismissal.

“Stomach-ache.”

Neville anxiously tried to redirect the conversation, “What else do you think about the attacks, Holly? Do you think those people and Mrs. Norris were chosen for a reason?” He truly hoped that she didn’t know, that she wasn’t involved at all. He didn’t want his friend to be guilty of this.

Holly sighed, Neville’s uncertainties pulling at her mind. “I honestly don’t know. I just worry that they might attack Autumn... or Hermione.”

At the sound of the bushy-haired girl’s name, both Gryffindors started.

“You worry about Hermione?” Ron queried doubtfully; he clearly didn’t believe her.

“Of course, she does,” Draco supplied heatedly. “Holly cares for her friends. She wouldn’t wish harm on them. She’d never betray them like that... or in anyway, for that matter.”

Holly subtly placed her hand on Draco's arm to keep him from saying anything more, but to Ron and Neville, it looked as though she was silently supporting his statement.

A surge of guilt went through Neville, and he shifted in awkwardly in his seat, wishing himself anywhere but there. Ron, however, merely stared down his nose at them, not a trace of remorse in his eyes.

"I'm sure that she wouldn't," Weasley commented ambiguously. He sent Draco a distrustful glare, forgetting himself. "So," he said after a minute, "so what else do you think about the Heir? I heard from some of the older students that something like this had happened before years ago."

Holly could barely hold in her surprise, her mental wanderings in Ron's brain zeroed in on that part of his thoughts. "Really?" she questioned, trying to sound only mildly interested, but she wasn't sure how well she pulled it off. "Which ones?"

"Some of the older students in Sly-er... our House," Neville stammered nervously; he was becoming increasingly uncomfortable.

Holly was their friend; they shouldn't be here interrogating her. They were Gryffindors; they were supposed to trust their friends, be loyal to them.

Draco asked, mentally smirking inside, "Who?"

Holly desperately wanted to know, too, and she was quickly riffling through Weasley's brain to find out.

"It doesn't matter," Ron cut him off with a wave of his hand. "It only matters that we heard about it."

Holly froze as she realised that Ron had no idea who he had overheard that little titbit from; all he remembered was that it was an upper-year Slytherin. He didn't even recall their gender.

Growling at herself, Holly made a mental note to find out.

“And what does matter then?” Draco asked scathingly, and the girl sent him a silent warning to back off. If they continued to press like that the Gryffindors would become suspicious, not that they shouldn’t have been already.

Ron’s face reddened, making him resemble a sunburned radish, a rather odd sight on Vincent’s features. “It matters that this happened before. It means that whoever it was got away with it.” His face became even redder.

Perhaps the potion was wearing off.

“Or they went to Azkaban,” Holly allowed slowly, becoming even more irritated, if that was even possible, by the Gryffindor’s attitude.

Did he honestly think he could fool them into believing he was Vincent when he behaved this way? Did he think them that dense?

“Azkaban?” Ron’s hair was now becoming red tinted.

A dark sneer appeared on Draco’s face. “Yes, Azkaban – **the wizarding prison**,” the blond explained as though he were speaking to a small child. “Honestly, if you were any slower, you’d be going backward.”

Sometimes, Draco just couldn’t help himself; Ron Weasley seemed to bring out the worst in him.

Weasley fisted his hands; his face seemed to be swelling with anger. However, it was only select parts of his face, like his nose and ears, while his lips were actually thinning.

The potion was wearing off.

Neville’s gasp of shock clued Ron in to his situation, and the look of horror on Weasley’s face showed that the same was happening to the other impostor. The two were instantly on their feet.

“Where are you going?” Draco asked innocently, not quite completely covering his malevolent tone.

“Er... medicine for my stomach,” Ron wheezed out as the two Gryffindors dashed to the Common Room entrance and flung themselves out.

Draco and Holly simply watched as they left, both silently seething.

“Bugger,” Draco intoned as soon as Ron and Neville were both gone. “Bugger.” He fisted his hands as he jumped up and began to pace. “I don’t know where they get off coming in here, accusing you of that, Holly.” He whirled to face her. “I honestly don’t know.” He gestured for emphasis and resumed his pacing, strangely looking more like his father in that moment than ever before.

Holly shook her head, rubbing her hands over her face in a mannerism very similar to Blaise. “I don’t know either.”

She exhaled slowly. Now that the two were gone, her anger was dissipating, leaving her strangely hollow inside.

“I thought that they were my friends, that they trusted me.” She murmured with self-recrimination, “How could I have been so stupid?”

In the background, Holly oddly heard the soft flutter of feathers.

Draco instantly deflated, coming to her defence. “Don’t blame yourself, Holly.” He moved in front of her. “It’s not your fault. They were your friends before, but people change. They simply aren’t now.”

She grimaced. “I should have known better.” Her teeth gritted.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of red-gold, but she was too consumed by her self-loathing to really register it.

“Why? Because you are... well, you know,” the boy asked in a very gentle tone. “Even you aren’t omniscient, Holly, and being what you are doesn’t mean that you will always know how people think and feel.” He leaned forward, only centimetres away from her. “You’re young yet and mostly untrained. You can’t expect yourself to catch everything.”

A spike of recrimination went through her, and she fought the tears that threatened to come. How had she missed it? How had she not noticed? Was she so desperate for friends that she would ignore their major faults and their disloyalty to simply have someone?

Her mind continued to darken with those thoughts, and she didn't even notice the worried expression on Draco's face. However, something odd happened then. Holly heard a soft cooing from the side of the room. Her heart instantly lifted, and she could breathe freely once again.

There was another flutter of wings, which she again missed; this time due to the fact that she was focused on Draco.

Holly finally made a neutral sound, quietly reaffirming the resolve to practice her gift. She was quite good at shielding, but the only minds she had ever truly read belonged to the Dursleys. And they didn't exactly have the best mental defences or any at all, for that matter. They couldn't even hide the most serious of things from her, but there were people who could. She needed to practice, become fluent in assessing dangers to her, even if they were from supposedly friendly sources.

"Come on," Draco said softly, offering her a hand. "Come on; we need to find Blaise and tell him."

He helped her stand, not releasing her when she was on her feet. The two were half-way to the dorm-room when one thing finally occurred to the blond.

"I wonder where that blasted Granger was."

The answer was the Hospital Wing, or at least, that was where the bushy-haired Gryffindor was the following morning. Apparently, she was involved in some sort of magical accident and was now sporting a furry body and tail.

Holly, Draco, and Blaise had discovered this little fact at breakfast when they overheard Percy telling a Ravenclaw Prefect. Of course, being the good friends that they were, the three had immediately

gone to the Hospital Wing to visit Hermione and to see her cat face for themselves.

It was then that Holly, liberally using her telepathy, discovered that the Gryffindor had accidentally taken cat hair with her Polyjuice Potion. Hermione had filched the hair from Milli's robes, hoping to impersonate the heavy-set girl. Yet, it had backfired spectacularly because she had taken a hair from Bastet, Milli's cat, instead.

Draco commented afterwards that it was a fitting punishment for Granger, who had most likely been the principal antagonist behind the Polyjuice plan. It seemed as though Fate was repaying the girl for her betrayal. Holly idly wondered what would happen to Weasley and Neville.

However, even Granger's **unfortunate** accident was not enough to completely lift the funk that had again settled on Holly. Even Blaise and Draco's declaration that they wanted her to work on her telepathy and that she was going to practice on them could not brighten her mood, though she did work out a schedule of when they could train on the days they weren't working on Defence.

She didn't really feel like talking about it with Blaise or Draco, who as conciliatory as they were, could never really understand her position. Well, unless they were also stabbed in the back.

As for Tom, she didn't want to take advantage of him even more. She had already used him as her personal venting source, dumping all of her emotional rubbish on him. Besides, he had enough problems as it was. He was fifty years out of his own time and trapped in a diary to boot. Further, Holly didn't feel like waiting to tell her other friends, who she would have to explain the situation to anyway, and she didn't want to write a letter to them either.

All of this basically left the dark-haired girl with one choice.

Who better to know what it was to be distrusted and misunderstood than one of the most distrusted and misunderstood creatures in existence?

Unbeknownst to Blaise and the rest of her friends, Holly had continued her practice with *Serpensortia*. She repeatedly conjured the serpent she had spoken to earlier, one which she had originally thought was a coral snake due to its banding. She was attempting to reconcile her ability with herself, a thing that Blaise would definitely approve of had Holly actually told him.

The snake, in turn, seemed happy to be called forth. He was fascinated with the idea of a human who could speak snake language. That kind of thing didn't happen everyday.

So after her short visit to Hermione, Holly returned to her room, waving off Draco and Blaise's concerns and telling them that she simply wished to be left alone. She walked up the hallway to her dorm, passing the painting of the unicorns. The girl eyed it as she went by; the portrait always seemed to draw her attention when she passed, no matter how distracted she was at the time.

Entering her room, Holly shut the door behind her. She plopped on her bed, not even bothering to shut her curtains as she was the only second-year girl currently at Hogwarts, and her roommates knew about her Parseltongue anyway. Nor did she close the diary, which was still open from last night when she had told Tom about the Gryffindors.

Releasing her wand from its holster, a birthday gift from Draco, she concentrated.

"Serpensortia."

And the beautiful coral snake gracefully landed on her covers.

He searched around for her, turning this way and that. ***"Greetingss, nestling."***

"Hello, Saladin," she responded back, picking the serpent up.

He coiled around her wrist.

Tom, who had been listening in via his open diary, started. He had known Holly was a Parselmouth due to the fact that he had overheard

her before. However, somebody was keeping secrets, but it wasn't like he could criticise her for that. He was guilty of it himself, and his secret was decidedly more... dangerous.

The wizard quietly listened in, remaining silent, not that it was hard to do as he couldn't actually speak.

The snake flicked his tongue, gazing at her strangely. ***"What isss wrong, nestling? Your sscent isss ssstrange today."*** He leaned forward, now only centimetres from her face.

Her eyes crossed as she tried to look at him. ***"The people at my school believe that I'm bad... as I have told you before."***

He inclined his head and again flicked his tongue.

"They think that I'm hurting others. Some of my friends actually tried to get information about the attacks from me."

"Were they your nest-matess?" Saladin inquired. When she replied negatively, he continued, ***"Then why do you not tell your nest-matess? They will ssurely defend you."***

She shrugged before realising that he couldn't see the gesture as close as he was to her face. ***"They already know."***

The serpent seemed confused. ***"Then why are you talking with me. You sshould go to them for comfort,"*** he responded shrewdly, guessing why she had summoned him from his much warmer home.

"They wouldn't understand," she admitted slowly. ***"They don't know what it is like to be hated for something that is clearly not my fault, but you do."***

"Yess, I know what it isss like to be distrusted without reason. Most humans hate my kind, and we have done nothing to them."

"That is true," Holly allowed. ***"But I am not like that."***

“No, you are not, but you do worry what otherss would do if they knew of your ssnake-gift,” the serpent accused gently.

She exhaled. ***“That’s also true. Draco, Blaise, and the others don’t even know that I actually use it.”***

“Ah, you keep many ssecretsss, nestling. You have not even told your nest-matesss that you have accepted your gift. Perhaps it isss time to tell them that asss well. They already know and do not care, but you do not give them the benefit of learning that you no longer mind either.” The snake eyed her from one side, turning his head. ***“I think that you need to tell them about it and of your unease with your false friendss. Your nest-matesss will understand.”***

Holly sat in silence. Saladin was absolutely right. The absurdity of an animal chastising her behaviour almost overwhelmed her for a moment, but she overcame it.

“Fine. I’ll go now.” She rose from her bed and walked quickly over to the door. She paused there, tucking the serpent under the sleeve of her robe.

He was not pleased and made it known as she opened the door. ***“Why must you do that?”***

“I don’t want anyone to see you and ask questions,” she responded as she went down the hall.

Once more, the unicorn portrait drew her attention as she approached.

Saladin humphed, if snakes were even capable of doing such a thing. ***“You should really be more open about your giftss. I do not think that the otherss in your nest would care either.”***

Holly walked by the picture. ***“Open? I don’t think that--”***

She froze as the portrait unexpected swung back, almost hitting her in the face as it went. Green eyes simply goggled at first at the back

of the picture, not noticing the snicker-like whiney, and then at the new hallway that had been revealed.

She felt that Saladin summed it up nicely.

“Well, that iss unexpected.”

AN: There is not a lot of Tom in this chapter. In fact, he is only mentioned in passing, but I couldn't really think of a way to involve him. Also, I have wanted to introduce the passageway for quite a while, and I have tried to build up to it. I am not sure how well I did. Oh, and we get to meet Holly's little friend Saladin the serpent. He will make various appearances throughout the story, but he will mostly be in the background, just like Hedwig. Bonus points to those that can guess where his name comes from.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks

Chapter Twenty: True or False

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Twenty: True or False

"I still can't believe that you found a secret passage within our own House!" Draco repeated several days later. "A Parseltongue-activated secret passage! Although, I guess it does make sense that Slytherin would have at least one."

Blaise laughed. "I still can't believe that you have been conjuring serpents and didn't tell us," he redirected at Holly, who was sitting next to him.

The green-eyed girl fought the urge to shrug. "I'm sorry; I just wanted to explore it a bit," she explained sheepishly.

"And that is perfectly fine," Luna added in, patting her hand.

The others had returned just hours before, break having ended. Immediately, they had been informed of all they had missed: both the Polyjuice Potion, though mentions of Holly's telepathy were left out, and the new passageway the girl had accidentally discovered. Now, the entire group was sitting in the boys' dorm, the only room where they could have any privacy, as each of the study rooms was occupied.

"I wonder if there're anymore," Theo stated suddenly, thinking about it. "Maybe around here somewhere." His eyes flickered around hopefully before he realised that there was no place for a secret entrance in the crowded room. "Or maybe in the corridor outside; I have always wondered about that painting with the Kneazles."

Pansy nodded. "I've wondered about the portrait of Siobhan Slytherin. There's just something about her--"

Milli snorted. "Well, I wonder where the passage leads. It hasn't been explored yet." She laid her head against Theo's headboard.

"We wanted to wait for you," Draco defended fiercely, running a hand through his hair. "Plus, safety in numbers. "No telling what kind of things could be hidden in there." He leaned back against his pillows next to Luna.

“True,” Milli allowed. “Perhaps it holds Slytherin’s legendary monster. It could be the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets.”

The shortest Slytherin nodded. “For all we know, it could be how the Heir is getting around.” Holly added thoughtfully, “It would explain why no one has seen them: they’re using a super-secret passageway, one that even Filch and the headmaster don’t know about.”

Everyone shifted uncomfortably.

“That is a distinct possibility,” Gavin allowed slowly, steepling his fingers. “Do you think we should go to someone about this?”

“No,” Blaise, Draco, and Milli all put in together, and the dark-skinned boy jumped... as did everyone else.

Blaise went on alone, “We can’t tell anyone about this because then we would have to explain how we found it; they would learn that Holly was a Parselmouth.” He exchanged a glance with her, trying to give her an encouraging smile.

“Is there any way we could tell without revealing that?” Autumn asked from her position on Vincent’s bed.

Cynthia, who was beside her, shook her head.

Luna gave an uncharacteristic frown. “No, we would have to reveal why no one had found it before and then actually physically show it to them. It would require her to speak Parseltongue.” She toyed with her bottle-cap necklace.

Draco sat up. “Perhaps there’s a way to set another password, an English one.”

“Maybe, but we’d have to play around with it to find out,” Holly said quietly. “And with the other students milling around, I don’t know when we’d have the opportunity to do so.”

Blaise voiced his agreement, “Yes, we’d have to do it really early in the morning before anyone else was awake.” He seemed to be

considering it. "Probably a weekend would be best since everyone has a bit of a lie in."

"And we could put some sort of alarm on the dorm rooms, so that we'd know when they were waking up," Luna inserted in her dreamy voice. "I know the perfect one; my father and I use it for the mumbas in our garden."

"That sounds brilliant," Draco put in with actual enthusiasm.

However, he sobered as the group moved on to another topic. His gaze drifted to both Greg and Vincent, who both shifted uncomfortably. Draco shivered as his mind drifted to a particular topic, one which he truthfully wanted to avoid. A strange itch went down his spine, the feeling one usually has when being watched.

Draco looked up. Both Holly and Luna were looking at him. His eyes widened.

"Is something wrong, Draco?" the dark-haired girl asked gently, and Blaise glanced over.

The blond fought his instinctive response. "Yes, everything is fi--" He inhaled sharply. "No, actually it's not."

That statement certainly caught the attention of the others, and he gave them a slight smirk.

"And?"

He sighed, exchanging another look with Vincent and Greg.

Draco reached into an inner robe pocket and said, "I received a letter from my father today. As you know, my mother and he were... away, on the continent during Yule. Vincent and Greg's parents were there, too." He hesitated for a moment, toying with the parchment of his letter. "They met with some acquaintances, ones from the old days."

Holly blinked, not liking where this was going. "I take it that he wrote to you about his meeting then?"

The blond gave her a weak smirk. "More or less. He didn't come out directly, but I caught his meaning." He inclined his head to Vincent and Greg. "Their parents wrote also."

"What did they all say?" Blaise queried, sitting up.

"They all said that bad things were happening at Hogwarts, as if we don't already know." Draco gave a mirthless laugh. "My letter is a warning," he spoke frankly now. "My father doesn't know the specifics – and he was afraid to ask the other, more loyal members of his group – but he does know that something has been planted at Hogwarts. Something bad, really bad." He exhaled. "I think that it has something to do with the Chamber."

The others were stunned.

"Why are you telling us this?" Milli finally asked the question that everyone had been wanting to voice.

His eyebrows twitched. "Other than the fact that you're my friends?" he questioned rhetorically. "Well, I think that he wanted me to spread the warning. No," Draco corrected, "I know that he wanted me to tell you."

"Why?" Holly asked, and everyone looked at her. "Er... why did he want us to know?"

"I don't know." Draco stared at her before throwing his hands up in the air. "Maybe he regrets what he did with his old gang, even if he didn't really have a choice in it. Maybe he doesn't want anything like it to happen again. I just don't know."

He hung his head, and Luna began to pat him on the back. Holly moved from Blaise's bed to sit next to the grey-eyed boy. Unexpectedly, she laid her head on his shoulder.

"We know that it's all connected," she whispered to him. "All of this: your warning, the attacks, the Heir, the Chamber – we know it's all connected. We just need to figure out how; we need to find the links between everything." She exhaled slowly. "Your father's associates

are definitely involved, and their master probably is as well. We all know that he's still around, lurking in the background."

"What should we do then?" Pansy asked weakly. "We can't go to anyone about this, not even Professor Snape or the headmaster."

"That's right," Draco cut in dejectedly. "I'm not entirely sure, but there are rumours of Severus' involvement with... well, you know. We can't risk going to him." He shook his head sadly. "And we can't go to Dumbledore; his hands are mostly tied by the Wizengamot and the Board. He wouldn't be able to give us much help. Besides, if anyone learned of what was really going on, we'd be in even more danger then."

He didn't need to say why they would be in greater danger. The Death Eaters would not take kindly to their meddling. Plus, the Ministry would interfere by virtue of its backward bureaucracy; after all, it was the same government that had allowed Voldemort to rise to power and reign evil upon them in the first place. For all they knew, the Ministry might even try to blame them for the attacks like their fellow students currently did, and there was no telling what they would do if and when they learned Holly was a Parselmouth, much less a telepath.

"So what should we do?" Milli repeated the earlier query. She fidgeted slightly and toyed with the cover of Theo's bed. "I mean, we need to clear Holly's name in all this mess. We can't let her take the blame for it."

Holly felt buoyed by that and even more so by everyone else's ready agreement to it. She smiled brightly as Draco wrapped an arm around her.

"Thank you," she murmured, and she didn't have to say for what.

"You're welcome," Milli answered with a firm nod. She hesitated for a moment before prompting again, "So what do we do?"

The smallest Slytherin considered the question. "First, we need to keep this to ourselves. We can't tell anyone, and I mean anyone. Not our parents, siblings, other friends. No one."

'Except Tom', she silently corrected, and Holly rubbed her temples, trying to dispel her growing headache. Her eyelids fluttered closed.

Gavin added, "We'd only make ourselves even bigger targets then. Plus, the blame could be pushed onto us." The dark-skinned boy was obviously not pleased by the last point.

"We should probably explore the passage Holly found, so we can rule it out as the way the Heir is travelling around," Blaise stated after a second.

His best friend quickly agreed, "We definitely should. Plus, we have a lead – sort of. Ron mentioned that this had occurred years before and that he learned it from one of the older Slytherins." Holly blinked wearily.

"Well," Draco finally murmured, moving his head on top of hers. "It was probably from one of the children of my father's... of the Death Eaters," he corrected. "They'd be the only ones who would make the connection, especially if their parents warned them, too." He glanced at Theo, who also had a connection to the Dark Lord's followers, albeit a more tenuous one. "I think that we can exclude people who have relatives in the group other than their parents."

Blaise cut in quickly, "That limits our list some, but how many Slytherins fit that profile?"

"Too many." Draco ran a hand over his face, lifting his head. He thought about it for a moment before adding, "Including everyone older than us: Dolohov, the other Dolohov, McNair, the three Becketts, Flint – even though he's gone – and his sister, Bole, Ise, Arleri, Dumas..." He ticked off the rest of the names.

Milli breathed out loudly. "That's a lot of people."

Theo and Gavin both nodded.

Pansy sighed. "Well, I know that my parents never mentioned anything to me. They probably don't know. I'd say that only inner circle members would, especially since it is such a big secret, so only they could tell their children."

"That would further limit our list," Luna added, blinking up at Draco's canopy. "How many are left after that."

"Dumas, the Dolohovs, and McNair," Draco concluded. "Those are the only ones I can ever remember being associated with the inner circle."

Vincent and Greg both nodded in agreement.

"So what are we going to do?" Autumn asked. "Follow them around? See if they reveal anything else and confront them?"

"It's the best that we can do for now," Blaise stated diplomatically. However, he was secretly thinking about a more effective method of finding out.

"Yes," Draco added, thinking the very same thing.

From beside him, Holly was alternating between the urge to sigh and to smile. It looked like her telepathy was about to get a great deal of practice.

Holly spent over a month refining her telepathic skills on her willing volunteers, Draco and Blaise, though there were some parts of their minds she didn't enter by mutual agreement. They did deserve some privacy, after all. Plus, the way that both had shifted uncomfortably and flushed when the matter came up was reason enough for her to readily agree.

Initially, Holly had considered immediately proceeding to ghosting the thoughts of the three people they had limited their search to and through a few others just in case. However, extracting such information from them sounded easy in principal, but it was far harder in practice. For one, Holly had only ever really read surface thoughts before, the little insignificant, and the not-so-insignificant, thoughts that sped through people's minds at light speed. She had only ever done deep scans on the Dursleys and on Ron the one time. The inner recesses of the mind were very different from the surface; they had their own flow and rhythm, and each person's was organised in a new way. Holly simply didn't have the experience yet to search quickly

and efficiently. As such, she would need a great deal of practice, lest she desire to continuously to wade through their minds, not really knowing where to look or even if she was close to the information.

So she had decided to practice first, going by the schedule they had worked out, an hour for every day they didn't have their extra Defence group, which had the added advantage of willing participants that could help her learn the inner recesses of their minds. Yet, even here Holly ran into snags. The prolonged use of her gift led to horrible and debilitating migraines. Thankfully, they eased as she became more skilled, but they were still limiting. Further, despite her increasing skill, she could still not get a clear telepathic read on Tom. She suspected it simply had to do with the fact that he didn't technically have a mind.

And, despite all her practice, Holly was no master at telepathy yet. It would take far more training for that, but she did at least feel somewhat competent with her ability. It was enough for her to get a better general reading on people, even when she wasn't trying. Further, her range for tracking others had extended quite a bit. Perhaps over time she would even begin to feel that she truly controlled her gift and not the other way around.

Meanwhile, her friends continued their search for their elusive Housemate, but they were having very little luck. For one, unlike Ron and the Gryffindors, they couldn't risk alienating the other Serpents, so they had to proceed lightly in their investigations. For another, the very fact that the incidents at Hogwarts were tied to the Death Eaters, and possibly Voldemort, left them somewhat nervous. They were treading into very dangerous territory. Draco could attest to the horrors associated with the Death Eaters, horrors no one wanted to bring down upon themselves.

Further, they hadn't yet had the opportunity to explore the secret passageway Holly had discovered. They kept trying to do so, but the timing was never right. Every time they attempted the feat something would happen to interfere. First, Titania Shacklebolt had had insomnia and had paced the connecting corridor. Then, one of the fourth-years had been ill and up the entire night. Next, the seventh-

years had stayed up working on a project. Finally, the sixth-years had had a sleepover with Ravenclaw.

Holly and her friends had been thwarted every time, wary of the risks of being caught. It also didn't help that only the girls could explore it as the boys could not enter the female wing of the House without a loud alarm blaring.

It was also during the month that Holly continued her correspondence with Remus and began writing to the Zabini's. It was somewhat awkward at first, especially since Holly was not really certain what to say to them. She didn't really know them outside of what she had learned during her time with them, but then, the point of writing them was to get to know the family.

Ron and Neville continued their suspicions of Holly after Christmas, though the latter's seemed to have cooled considerably, guilt eating at him. The redhead, with a reluctant Neville in tow, was increasingly seen snooping around the Slytherins, probably trying to make up for the fact that Hermione couldn't currently help them.

Like before, Holly avoided them as best she could. She had been furious during and after the Polyjuice incident, and though she had tried to control her rage as best she could, it occasionally simmered beneath the surface. Mostly, however, she now felt tired and hollow inside like she had been used to the breaking point and then some. It was one thing to be suspicious of a friend, but it was quite another to actually believe they were guilty and do your damndest to prove it. Holly was not taking such betrayal very well, not that anyone could really blame her.

There were a number of other things occurring during that time as well, several of them rather odd in nature. For one, Snape, the normally nasty professor that he was, started behaving rather oddly; he was actually being rather nice to Holly now. Well, as nice as the Potions master seemed to be capable of being to a Potter, which is to mean that he no longer sneered or shouted at her. He didn't like her or ignore her either. The man was simply neutral to her, giving neither censure nor praise and simply showing a blank face. Even considering his fierce defence of her over the attacks, it was a bit out

of character. He had simply ignored her before, pretending she wasn't even there. Now, he actually acknowledged her presence, as neutral as the acknowledgement was. In truth, it was a bit awkward, especially for Holly, as she had no idea how to react to this. Still, it was better than nothing.

The other second-years were understandably stumped by this odd change in behaviour and had of course questioned Holly. Her explanation was simple. She had called a truce.

Just before the holiday, she had sent her Head of House a letter and a package. The letter thanked him for defending her against the other students and for protecting her from Quirrell the year before. The package was a peace offering, one which Draco, a fantastic Potions student, had helped her pick out.

Holly noted another bizarre circumstance during January also. Everywhere she went, from the girl's loo to the Common Room, she could continuously feel eyes on her. And no matter how she stretched out her mental senses and searched with her telepathy, the girl could never find anyone. The only clues she had to her stalker were the flash of red-gold out of the corner of her eye and a strange music that always followed.

Fortunately, on the last day of the month, the second-years finally caught a break: Milli overheard Dimitri Dolohov, brother of Alé's friend Sophia, warning one of his close friends about the attacks. The third-year did not mention how he knew, but he commented that something similar had taken place years earlier. Now, they were able to narrow down their search and focus completely on him, though they did watch his sister some also. Soon, Holly would attempt to ghost through his thoughts for information.

January faded into February, and Hermione was liberated from the Hospital Wing, fur free. It was an event only notable for the fact that the bushy-haired girl was once more searching for evidence against Holly.

The first week of February was witness to Moaning Myrtle's worst tantrum to date, one that completely flooded the corridor. McGonagall, who had been called in by Filch to calm the distraught ghost, had

been overheard telling Professor Vector that students were now throwing things at the spectre. The deputy headmistress really couldn't blame the girl for being upset. She was seriously debating forbidding pupils to go there all together unless they were clearly in need of a toilet, especially since several boys had been seen loitering.

Other than that, everything seemed to going rather well considering. Professor Sprouts' Mandrakes were maturing nicely, and the Petrification victims would soon be freed. There had been no new attacks since Nearly Headless Nick and Justin Finch-Fletchley. The whispers about Holly were beginning to quieten down, though people were still curious about the shield she had conjured during the Duelling Club. However, a gloom had still managed to settle on the residents of the castle.

Enter Gilderoy Lockhart.

Valentine's Day dawned cloudy, and it was a bleary-eyed Holly who wandered into the Great Hall, only to freeze a few steps in as she really started to look at her surroundings.

Pink and red flowers covered the walls and tables. Heart-shaped confetti rained down from the ceiling, and Holly had to charm her hair to keep it off. At the teacher's table, she noticed that Lockhart was already up and beaming, an unusual thing that early in the morning. The dandy was wearing robes of such a shocking pink that Holly was forced to look away to save her eyesight.

She sat down to breakfast, flicking confetti off of her toast and welcoming her very stunned Housemates as they began to filter in. Milli and Theo seemed particularly sickened by the decor. Titania Shacklebolt actually seemed to find it funny, but that might have had something to do with the fact that she had just hexed Oliver Wood's face red and into the shape of a heart.

Eventually, everyone was gathered, and Lockhart called for silence. What they soon learned only revolted them more.

"Happy Valentine's Day! And may I thank the forty-six people who have so far sent me cards! Yes, I have taken the liberty of arranging

this little surprise for you all, and it doesn't end here!" Lockhart announced with a great grin.

Milli rolled her eyes as twelve gruff dwarves entered the Hall. "I hope no one from our House sent him one."

Autumn pointedly avoided the chubby girl's eye.

Lockhart carried on, "My friendly, card-carrying cupids! They will be roving around the school today delivering your valentines! And the fun doesn't stop here! I'm sure my colleagues will want to enter into the spirit of the occasion! Why not ask Professor Snape to show you how to whip up a Love Potion!"

The Potions master looked positively murderous at the suggestion, and the ponce didn't even notice.

"And while you're at it, Professor Flitwick knows more about Entrancing Enchantments than any wizard I've ever met, the sly old dog!"

The Charms professor started before burying his face in his hands. It was impossible tell if he was laughing or crying.

And from there, the day only seemed to become worse. Holly's Slytherin friends personally and discreetly handed out their own valentines. However, not all of her acquaintances did.

"Oy, you! 'Olly Potter!" one of the dwarves shouted as she passed by the Charms Corridor. He pushed passed the various people in the crowded hallway, kicking Neville in the shins and stepping on Ron's foot.

Holly briefly contemplated dodging out of the way, something she was very good at, but knew that it was ultimately pointless. Trust Blaise and Draco to be late when she needed them the most. She sent Theo and Milli a pleading look.

"I've got a musical message to deliver to 'Olly Potter in person." The dwarf pulled out his harp.

Her gaze turned desperate. Milli whipped out her wand, but the corridor was filled with people, including the first-year Gryffindors. There were too many people in the way.

Ginny Weasley watched with breathless anticipation, her eyes darting to her brother and his friend and back to Holly. Neville bent down to rub his aching shin, and a yellow pendant falling free from his pocket where he had been keeping it.

The dwarf pulled up along side Holly, and she wished she knew a Silencing spell that worked on living things.

*"Her eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,
Her hair is as dark as a blackboard.
I wish she saw me, mates we're meant to be,
The hero who conquered the Dark Lord."*

Of course, it was at that moment that Draco and Blaise finally showed up. The caramel-skinned boy instantly went to Holly, breaking up the gathered crowd. The blond, however, went immediately to Ginny's side, hissing something at her.

The girl's eyes went first to her brother and then to Neville, widening when she saw the pendant he was in the process of placing in his pocket. She darted down the hallway, covering her face with her hands. Ron snarled and went for his wand, but Neville pulled him back and down opposite side of the hall. Draco finally came up to Holly, and the Slytherins quickly hurried to class.

Just as Holly sat down something occurred to her. "What did you say to Ginny?"

Draco smirked darkly. "I told her that you didn't appreciate the valentine she sent... or the one her brother sent, whichever it was."

"I didn't." She shuddered.

"Maybe Ginny sent it for Ron," Blaise supplied helpfully, earning himself a glare. He beamed cheekily and carried on, "**Mates we're meant to be**'? Talk about a double entendre."

Draco snorted. Theo and Milli laughed. Holly simply scowled.

That night, Holly did something she had been dreading since just after break. She ghosted through Dimitri Dolohov's thoughts. Surprisingly, it was easier than she had anticipated. With all the practice she had been putting in with Blaise and Draco, Holly had become somewhat skilled and competent with her gift.

She simply sat down in the corner of the nearly empty Common Room, Blaise at her side. Dimitri was the only other person there, and he was working on an assignment for McGonagall. Green eyes drifted shut, and she reached out slowly, following the flow of the third-year's thoughts. She travelled from the surface, which was filled with Transfiguration figures, and waded in deep. Holly paused as she reached the recesses, and Dimitri began to scratch at his forehead.

Instantly, she lightened her mental touch, and he stopped, returning to his homework. Daunted, Holly turned back and gaped at the arrangement of Dolohov's mind. It wasn't anything like Blaise or Draco's.

Blaise's mindscape resembled a library, reflecting his love of reading, though it wasn't like any library she had ever been in before. For one, it was huge, covering kilometres, and it was outdoors. The books, shelves, etc. all sat outside in the middle of a lush meadow, protected by a short wall that encircled the entire area. For another, all of the furniture was natural, seeming as though the flowers had simply grown into the appropriate shapes. Each book was a thought, and each bookshelf grouped them together into sections. Blaise's mind was very organised and in a way that was very compatible with her own thought processes as her own mind was much like his. All Holly had to do for a deep scan was to first climb over the short wall, locate his mental catalogue, find the appropriate book, and waltz over to the section.

On the other hand, Draco's mind was a potions lab, not a very surprising thing. However, it also was different from real labs as it was located at the top of a tower, and his thoughts were the various

peculiar objects on the shelves. It, too, was organised, but Holly had a slightly harder time with him due to their mental differences.

Dimitri's mind was like neither; his mindscape was a large house.

Shaking her mental head, Holly tested the door, and finding it bolted, she picked the two locks and entered. She began to rifle through his thoughts, the various objects in the rooms, leaving one as soon as she realised it wasn't what she wanted and moving on.

Minutes passed, and she became frustrated. Idly, Holly wished that she could just find the blasted thing and get on with it. Unexpectedly, her attention was instantly drawn to a room down the hall. She followed the impulse, finding exactly what she wanted.

The previous attacks had happened fifty years before.

In the outside world, Holly Potter smiled.

Blaise looked highly impressed, glancing at his watch. She'd been gone less than an hour. Evidently, all their practice was paying off.

He slowly watched her come back to herself, offering her a helping hand up. The two wandered deeper into the dorms, away from Dimitri and towards their friends. They now had new information to share. However, it wasn't until a few days later that they were actually able to put it to good use.

Tom Riddle was the only person outside of the mixed Slytherin and Ravenclaw group who had any inkling of what they were doing, mostly due to the fact that Holly, Blaise, et al kept him informed. Of course, he was probably one of the few who had any idea of what was truly happening at Hogwarts School, but what he dreaded, what he feared, could not possibly be occurring.

It simply wasn't possible, but it was the only explanation.

The Basilisk couldn't be going through the school. It couldn't be attacking people because he had sealed it away in the Chamber. And sure as Circe, he hadn't let it out again.

That left only one suspect.

Parseltongue was an exceptionally rare gift, and the odds of another Parselmouth at the school were astronomical.

However, he didn't want to believe that Holly was guilty either, but it was the only explanation that made any sense. She had been nothing but amicable to him, opening up to him and befriending him when he was just a shadow of his former self. She had trusted him with the knowledge of her childhood, revealing more to him than she had ever told anyone else, including Blaise. Even now, she trusted him enough to tell him of everything they had discovered, never knowing that he was holding out on them. Holly... and his other new friends had been very good to him, and he was a book, for Merlin's sake!

And a liar.

On a more logical level, there was the fact that, as good as Holly was, she was still a second-year. It had taken him to his fifth-year to find the entrance to the Chamber, and that had only been after extensive research. Even with luck on her side, the likelihood of her finding it so quickly was very small; she would have had just over a year.

Then, there was the fact that, while not a new discovery, her Parseltongue was something she was only now becoming comfortable with. This meant that she probably wouldn't trust the ability enough to use it on such a large scale. Her unease was probably the reason she hadn't told him of it yet, not that he could blame her given attitudes about the gift. He wouldn't have even known if he hadn't overheard her during their extra Defence lesson or when she conjured the serpent to speak with him.

And no matter the evidence supporting her or against her, he still wasn't certain; he couldn't be, so he hadn't said anything. Tom had remained silent about his knowledge, not even alluding to the fact that he knew of the earlier attacks. He had been involved in them, after all, even if he hadn't meant to kill that girl.

Even that wasn't the only reason he remained silent. For one, Tom was very much aware of how much the Gryffindors' betrayal had hurt Holly, and he didn't want to do that to her as well. He knew what Holly

was like; she treated her friends as though they were the most precious thing in the world, and with her upbringing, it was almost a given. And he didn't want to shatter her perceptions about either Hagrid or himself.

Yet, there was still another lingering reason, too. Put simply, Tom was terrified of her reaction.

She was his friend, his first real friend, and he didn't want her to think hideous things of him. Tom was afraid of her response to his sins, his betrayal of Hagrid, and all the deceit. He feared the horror she would undoubtedly feel when she realised just who and what he really was.

So he buried the past, praying that nothing more than remnants would ever come to light. But as all things are wont to do, the truth finally surfaced. At least in part.

His diary cover, which had been shut for once, opened and words appeared.

Hello, Tom. It's me, Holly. Blaise, Luna, and Draco are here, too. The script paused before continuing quickly, Do you remember how I mentioned Dimitri Dolohov?

Tom did remember, though he wondered how they would get the information out of the boy.

Well, we finally managed to learn that the attacks first occurred fifty years ago... the same time you were at Hogwarts.

It wasn't quite an accusation, but to Tom's guilty soul it might as well have been.

Yes... *I know*, he finally admitted it.

A moment passed.

How?

If Tom had been able to, he would have gritted his teeth. *I was involved, Holly. How else do you think I got my special award to the school?*

His moment was quickly approaching. He could tell her the truth, facing complete rejection and being undoubtedly destroyed. Or he could spread the same lies he had given to Dippet, blame Hagrid for everything.

Why didn't you tell us?

The implicit question was: *Why didn't you tell me?*

Tom faltered, indecision coursing through him. He had two options; which should he choose?

Nervousness built in him, fear tickling through also. Tom tried to write the truth, but it wouldn't come. He couldn't do it; he couldn't tell her the truth. She would absolutely hate him.

It couldn't possibly be the same person, Holly, the one they punished.

If he had been able to do so, Tom would have curled into a ball and died on the spot.

I didn't even really believe him guilty in the first place. Tom honestly added the last part, trying to give her some form of hope and praying that she would stop pressing him for answers. *I'm sorry, Holly*

If only she knew what he was apologising for.

There was nothing for a moment before writing hastily appeared, but it was from Blaise.

Why not? Why didn't you believe?

Tom cringed. *He's not that type of person, not really,* he answered candidly, wishing he could take it all back and just tell them what had really happened.

It was Draco's writing this time. *Then why was he blamed?*

Tom didn't answer.

Tom?

The diary-wizard teetered with the truth again, but he was in far too deep. She would certainly hate him now; they all would. He could only keep feeding lies.

He was the only suspect. The evidence pointed to him.

Who was it? It was Holly again. Please, tell me.

Tom was filled with so much shame; he had only felt like this once before, when he had turned in an innocent boy.

Hagrid.

The writing came out in a guilty whisper.

Rubeus Hagrid.

It was Hagrid? Holly seemed to be desperately hoping that she had misread.

It was too late.

Yes.

Tom could practically hear her shoulders slump and her heart break, and he proceeded to destroy it even more by slowly telling her about the young girl's death, Hagrid's pet, and the boy's expulsion. Yet, he never once mentioned that he had all but framed Hagrid, turning him in for a crime he hadn't committed.

And in that moment, Tom Riddle truly hated himself. Even more so than he usually did.

The next few days, Holly was almost ill with disbelief. It couldn't be Hagrid; it couldn't possibly be the man who she had tea with, who had given her the beautiful album, who was her friend.

It couldn't be, but apparently, it was.

And Holly had no idea what to do about it. Neither did anyone else. They didn't want to be like the Gryffindor trio and spy on their friend; they didn't want to be suspicious of him in the first place. However, it wasn't like they could just ask him either; Draco had clearly stated that wouldn't go over well. They didn't have any option but to wait and see... and pray that it was someone else. Anyone else!

So they looked for evidence elsewhere, but the only other possible lead they had was the secret corridor. They had finally managed to get into it, only to discover that their little passageway lead into another far longer corridor, one with dozens of other connecting hallways.

It was an entire network of hidden passageways!

Apparently, the Chamber wasn't Salazar Slytherin's only secret.

And all of them were dust and debris free, cleaned by magic. It would be impossible to tell if anyone else used them unless they were actually caught in the act, a tough thing considering the fact that the passages were so extensive that the Slytherins didn't even know where most of them led. They simply didn't have the time or resources to explore them all, especially since Holly was the only one who could currently open the entrance.

They grudgingly admitted defeat, not totally giving up their explorations but knowing that there was still the slim possibility that they had been on to something. They only had one option left now, one they refused to use.

Weeks went by, and Holly refused all of Hagrid's invitations to tea, stating that she was too busy. But Draco, Blaise, and Luna didn't buy that. They knew the real reason she refused to go. She was too afraid of accidentally hearing the giant's thoughts and discovering he really was guilty.

February flew by followed by March.

Draco, finally having enough of Lockhart, took to questioning the dandy on every little detail in his books, hoping to catch him in a mistake. It was actually rather amusing to see the ponce start and stutter, attempting to defend himself and his works, while a smirking Draco looked on. The boy quickly ensnared Holly in his plot against the man, mostly to distract her and keep her from brooding. Milli and Theo soon joined in with glee, occasionally causing magical mischief when the teacher's back was turned or when he was distracted by the other two. It wasn't unusual for several of his pictures to be destroyed or for his books to suspiciously catch fire during any particular lesson. On one notable occasion, they had managed to mutate his chair so that it would snap at his bottom every time he sat down.

The second-years signed up for their new classes after Easter. Both Draco and Blaise decided to take Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, and Care of Magical Creatures. Holly, too, was going to do the same until Tom gave her an interesting bit of information: students who signed up for four or more classes were usually forced to drop it down to three so that their schedule would work out. However, a select few, such as Tom himself, were given another option. That of a Time Turner, a device that would allow them to relive hours.

Hearing this, Holly was immediately intrigued as were Draco and Blaise. They could put a Time Turner to excellent use for things other than class. They would have more time to research, explore the passageways, and do a thousand others things.

After much debate, it was decided that all three of them couldn't sign up for that many classes; it would be rather suspicious. However, Holly was widely known for her thirst of knowledge, so she could probably get away with it. Plus, she was the most likely to be given the option of a Time Turner. She was the bloody Girl-Who-Lived! The Ministry wouldn't provide the same privilege to the son of a Death Eater or one of a supposed Black Widow.

Yet, Holly ran into an unexpected problem. She needed to take four classes as there was no way she was going to take all five. Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, and Care of Magical Creatures were all fine. The green-eyed girl had wanted to take them in the first place, but there

was a problem with the final two options. Sure as Siobhan, she couldn't take Muggle Studies; she was Muggle-raised!

Someone like Hermione could probably pull that one off but not Holly.

As for Divination, it was reportedly run by a batty crack-pot, who wasn't even a real Seer and loved to predict student's untimely and horrible deaths. Holly couldn't really see herself enjoying the class under those circumstances, and the chance that her telepathy could be revealed was very high. Seeing and telepathy were related Mind Arts, and there was the possibility that they would be magically tested for them in Divination. Yet, the allure of a Time Turner was strong, strong enough to override the Slytherin's unease, so she finally signed up for Divination.

As spring arrived, Holly continued to sense the elusive presence around her, still seeing the red-gold flutter out of the corner of her eye. But actually centring in on it was difficult at best. It was like trying to grab at wisps of smoke, something exceptionally hard and all but impossible to do.

April quickly faded into May.

No new attacks occurred, and the Slytherins still refused to question Hagrid about his part in them. The red-gold presence hung about once again, though it seemed to come around a little less often. They continued their reign of terror against the dandy with Holly and Draco tag-teaming him. The two now harassed the ponce during every lesson, oftentimes leaving a stuttering Lockhart in their wake after the bell had rung. It wasn't an unusual sight to see him pouring over not only his own books but additional Defence texts, trying to get his facts straight.

Gavin and his long-time girlfriend, Jackie Jordan, broke up. She complained that he no longer spent time with her, which he didn't as he was too busy with the Chamber mystery. Cassius DeBello, who had all but avoided them after the Duelling Club, decided to start harassing Luna again. He was secretly but severely hexed by Milli for his efforts and soon thought the better of it.

Finally, exams were quickly approaching as were the final Quidditch games.

The night before Gryffindor's match against Hufflepuff, Ron and Neville's things managed to be ransacked. It was a fact that Holly learned from the twins the next morning before they headed to the pitch. Nothing was apparently taken, or at least nothing the two would admit to losing, but the idea itself disturbed everyone in the House. Only a Gryffindor could have entered the dorm unobserved; one of their own Housemates was responsible.

That afternoon, Holly and her friends chatted with each other in the stands, waiting for the match to start. However, just as the players were coming onto the field, McGonagall rushed out onto the pitch, her hat askew. A large purple megaphone was in her hand.

"This match has been cancelled." She ignored the hisses, boos, protests, and a furious Oliver Wood. "All students are to make their way back to the House Common Rooms, where their Heads of House will give them further information. As quickly as you can, please!"

The Transfiguration professor waved over both Neville and Ron as the pitch was cleared. Hermione was nowhere in sight. Holly knew it couldn't possibly be good.

Less than an hour later, she knew she was right. There had been another attack, a double attack. Hermione and a Ravenclaw Prefect, Penelope Clearwater, were now laying in the Hospital Wing, Petrified like the other victims. They had been discovered in the library by Ginny Weasley when she had gone fetch the other Gryffindor for the Quidditch match.

It was difficult to tell which one had been attacked first since they were both Muggleborns, but most of the professors seemed to think that it was Hermione since she was known to frequent the library in the morning hours; the unfortunate sixth-year had probably happened upon the scene by accident.

Nothing more suspicious than a very out of place book was discovered with them, but the text in itself was an oddity. It was about Parselmouths.

Understandably, this information made Holly very nervous. Was it possible that Hermione had figured her out? Or was it simply related to the fact that Salazar Slytherin was a Parselmouth? Could Slytherin's monster be a snake? But what kind of serpent Petrified people instead of killing them?

They needed an answer, and there was only one possible person who could provide it.

Hagrid.

AN: Yes, this does mean that Tom actually feels guilty for framing Hagrid. I am not going for the "Tom is completely evil from birth" plot. Personally, I believe in an equal mix of nature and nurture, and this story will reflect that. Also, I wouldn't go blaming him just yet. Remember that he isn't possessing anyone, which means that Holly really isn't responsible. There is more going on than you think.

Oh, the fact that Hermione and Penelope were not found with the mirror is very important. Also, I would like to point out that at this point Hermione does not know about the Basilisk. She couldn't possibly know since she based the idea off of the voices Harry heard, ones which Holly hasn't and wouldn't have told the other girl about anyway.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks

Chapter Twenty-One: In the Forest of the Night

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Twenty-One: In the Forest of the Night

Holly and Blaise along with Draco, who insisted on going, thankfully all fit under her Invisibility Cloak. They would have taken Luna, too, but there wasn't enough room for four people. Not to mention the fact that she still slept in the Ravenclaw dorms, and they didn't want to increase their chances of getting caught by sneaking all the way there and then to Hagrid's hut.

Draco was not exactly thrilled with the idea of a visit as he and Hagrid had never really seen eye to eye, both literally and figuratively. It wasn't that they had quarrelled or anything of a similar nature. Come to think of it, Holly honestly couldn't remember if they ever talked to one another, but Hagrid disliked Draco's father greatly and was slightly wary of the son. As such, the blond had never ventured down with them before, not even when Holly and Blaise still went to have tea with the giant man, and the grey-eyed boy had always been a bit sceptical when the girl said it would be perfectly fine if he did. However, Draco was going now, despite his unease, and Holly appreciated the gesture.

The three knocked on her large friend's door just after nine that night. The man opened it with his crossbow in hand and Fang at his hip before realising who it was. He quickly led them inside, shutting and bolting the door. They whipped off the cloak, Hagrid starting when he saw Draco, who he obviously hadn't expected. However, he soon seemed to forget that the blond was even there. It was like his mind was in another place entirely.

Hagrid brought them boiling mugs of water, having forgotten the tea bags, as they sat. Fang, who instantly took to Draco, was slobbering all over the blond's lap, despite his attempts to get rid of the hound. Holly was just opening her mouth to speak when there was another loud knock at the door. The three Slytherins instantly threw the cloak over themselves and backed into a distant and shadowed corner.

It was Dumbledore at the door, and an odd grey-haired man with a lime-green bowling hat was with him. Holly instantly stiffened at the revolting feel of the stranger's mind. On the other hand, Draco inhaled sharply, distractedly gazing at the man.

'It's the Minister! Cornelius Fudge!' he thought rather loudly in her direction.

Holly got the message, her mind jumping back to the conversation.

Fudge said shortly, "Bad business, Hagrid. Very bad business. Had to come with all these attacks on Muggleborns. Things've gone far enough. Ministry's got to act." He fingered his hat, which was in his twitching hands.

Hagrid paled significantly and turned beseechingly to the headmaster. "I never. You know that I never, Professor Dumbledore, sir..."

The headmaster frowned at Fudge. "I want it understood, Cornelius, that Hagrid has my full confidence." His eyes flashed, and Holly felt the buzz of power.

"Look, Albus. Hagrid's record's against him. Ministry's got to do something – the school governors have been in touch--" Fudge nervously stated.

The professor interrupted him, "Yet again, Cornelius, I tell you that taking Hagrid away will not help in the slightest." His eyes were practically glowing, and the air crackled ominously.

Fudge avoided looking at anyone, suddenly finding the tabletop very interesting. "Look at it from my point of view. I'm under a lot of pressure. Got to be seen to be doing something. If it turns out it wasn't Hagrid, he'll be back, and no more said. But I've got to take him. Got to. Wouldn't be doing my duty--"

Hagrid's eyes were impossibly wide. "Take me? Take me where?" He started as realisation sunk in.

But Fudge cut in before he could say anything else. "For a short stretch only. Not a punishment, Hagrid, more a precaution." The Minister wouldn't meet the larger man's eyes. "If someone else is caught, you'll be let out with a full apology--"

Hagrid's mind screamed one word, '**Azkaban!**'

And Holly almost fell to her knees with the force of it. She only managed to keep her feet due to the fact that both Draco and Blaise quickly latched onto her, supporting her weight. She steadied herself after a moment, missing out on part of the conversation.

However, another rap at the door interrupted the assembled group, and Holly had been too preoccupied with what was occurring in the hut to even notice someone else approaching. Draco stiffened and let out an audible gasp.

“Already here, Fudge,” Lucius Malfoy stated, his mind typically shielded.

Yet, Holly could still sense that it oddly did not match his dismissive mannerisms.

“Good, good--”

Hagrid furiously interrupted the aristocrat, “What’re you doin’ here? Get outta my house! Already bad enough that your...” he trailed off, realising that he had almost revealed that the three Slytherins were present.

Lucius’ eyes narrowed as he tried to figure out the rest of the giant’s sentence. “My dear man, please believe me, I have no pleasure at all in being inside your... er... did you call this a house?” He sneered, his thoughts once more not really matching the feeling he was trying to project. His mind was filled with nervousness and dread, despite his icy mask.

He carried on after a second, “I simply called at the school and was told that the headmaster was here.” The aristocrat absentmindedly fingered the top of his cane.

Dumbledore’s eyes continued to blaze, something strange passing through them. “And what exactly did you want with me, Lucius?”

The gentleman’s blank face didn’t falter, but his emotions churned, filled with a strange sort of resolve. “**Dreadful** thing, Dumbledore, but the governors feel it is time for you to step aside.” The blond took out a long roll of parchment. “This is an Order of Suspension – you’ll find

all twelve signatures on it. I am afraid we feel you are losing your touch.” Lucius felt like he was the one that was really losing his touch, but his resolve seemed to buoy again.

“How many attacks have there been now? Two more this afternoon, wasn’t it? At this rate, there will be no Muggleborns left as Hogwarts, and we all know what an **awful** loss that would be to the school.” He visibly clenched the top of his cane, mind whirling once more.

Lucius was a complete contradiction, and his thoughts were all over the place. He knew that if the headmaster left, the school would be in danger, and it was obvious that he didn’t truly desire that. The gentleman didn’t want Dumbledore to leave, but he was giving the headmaster an order of dismissal.

Holly was understandably confounded, attempting to discern what exactly was going on. Beside her, Draco trembled, watching his father with a sickened expression. The girl focused more fully on the aristocrat, trying to understand his mind, his motivation. However, none of it made any sense. At least, it didn’t until she caught a single, fleeting thought.

‘For my son.’ And Lucius’ determination firmed completely.

She exhaled suddenly, comprehension flickering across her features. From underneath the cloak, Holly squeezed Draco’s hand in hers. She mentally tried to convey her discovery, but his thoughts were too chaotic for it to get through.

In the meantime, things only seemed to degenerate further. Hagrid instantly jumped to the headmaster’s defence, and Fudge surprisingly did, too. The eyes of the Slytherins darted back and forth between Draco’s father and the Minister like a Bludger with two Beaters. Lucius simply sneered and coolly replied to every accusation, his mind filled with steely determination.

After several moments, it seemed as though Fudge had finally had enough of the gentleman.

“See here, Malfoy, if **Dumbledore** can’t stop them... I mean to say, who **can**?” He rubbed his hand across his sweaty forehead.

Lucius' eyes froze for an instantly, and he once again tightened his grip on his cane. "That remains to be seen, but as all twelve of us have voted--"

Hagrid furiously inserted himself, jumping up and causing the entire hut to shake, "An' how many did yeh have ter threaten an' blackmail before they agreed, Malfoy, eh?" He shook an enormous hand at the gentleman, who immediately stepped back, alarm flashing across his face.

Instantly, Lucius seemed to come back to himself, adding smoothly, "Dear, dear, you know, that temper of yours will lead you into trouble one of these days, Hagrid." He quietly added with a strange tone to his voice, "I would **advise** you not to shout at the Azkaban guards like that. **They won't like it at all.**" He was filled with loathing, but Holly was unsure if it was directed at Hagrid or himself.

The vague hint was lost on both Fudge and Hagrid, though Dumbledore seemed to catch it. The elderly professor gave Lucius another, much more appraising glance, one which the other men missed due to Hagrid's reply.

The giant man screamed back, "Yeh can' take Dumbledore! Take him away, an' the Muggleborns won' stand a chance! There'll be a killin' next!" He looked like he fancied nothing more than the chance to hit the aristocrat.

Thankfully, Dumbledore inserted himself in front of the gamekeeper. "If the governors want my removal, Lucius, I shall of course step aside," the headmaster assured, despite vehement protests, and his eyes burned into Lucius' grey ones.

Something intangible passed between them in an instant, but it was once more lost on the Minister and Hagrid.

The headmaster spoke the next part carefully and clearly, not wanting anyone to miss a word. "However, you will find that I will only truly have left this school when none here are loyal to me. You will also find that help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it."

Holly knew without a doubt the comment was directed at her.

Lucius tried to dismiss him with a wave, but it seemed to fall flat. Silence ensued for a moment, only to end when Fudge indicated that it was time to go. Dumbledore and the blond stared at each other for a second more before moving to the door.

Hagrid, however, dug in his feet at the exit. "If anyone wanted ter find out some **stuff**, all they'd have ter do would be ter **follow the spiders**. That'd lead 'em right! That's all I'm sayin'." He paused as Fudge goggled at him. "Oh, an' someone'll need ter fee Fang while I'm away."

With that, they left. Lucius lingered for a few seconds, taking several deep breaths. He steeled his shoulders before sweeping out and shutting the door firmly behind him.

Draco stared numbly after his father, his face frozen with shock. He slipped free of the cloak, standing in front of the closed exit and simply gaping. Unexpectedly, he sagged forward, barely catching himself on the door. He leaned heavily against it, resting his head on the wooden surface between his hands.

"He didn't mean it," Holly finally concluded, coming up behind him and placing her hand on his shoulder. "He was forced into it, Draco."

Draco didn't reply. Blaise gazed at Holly, not quite sure what to do. Yet, it wasn't like she knew either.

Everything just seemed to be coming undone around them. Students were once more being attacked. Lucius Malfoy was acting exceedingly bizarre. The Ministry was now involved. Hagrid was being taken off to Azkaban.

Their best and only suspect was gone.

Even worse, so was Albus Dumbledore, their only chance for salvation.

“Follow the spiders?” Theo asked, the following morning. “What by Circe does that mean?”

Milli snorted, rolling her dark-green eyes. “I think it is pretty self-explanatory.”

Theo stuck his tongue out at her, and she laughed, reaching over to flick him.

“Aside from that,” he corrected, turning to Holly.

She shrugged slightly. “I’m not really sure,” the smallest Slytherin stated.

“Hence, why we are in the library, looking it up,” Draco added with a cheeky smile. His grin was a nice change from the brooding silence of the night before. Even with Holly’s assurance of his father’s true intentions, the blond had still taken it all rather badly.

The entire group of friends was currently sitting at one of the back tables, hidden in a convenient corner. It was Sunday and very early, the sun having only risen a short time before, but they were already gathered. Holly, Blaise, and Draco had quickly filled in everyone as soon as they had returned to the dorms the previous evening. They had understandably been shocked.

Hagrid was their only solid lead, and Dumbledore was probably the only reason there hadn’t been an attack a day. And now, they were gone, banished by the same corruption that had allowed Voldemort to rise in the first place.

Both were gone, their departing comments the only leads the Slytherins now had. The headmaster’s statement was cryptic at best, and Holly had tried to puzzle it out to with no luck. The only thing she was able to come up with was that he meant for her to seek out help from her friends. Thankfully, Hagrid’s statement was much easier to decipher, which had led them to their current course.

“But where should we begin looking?” Luna’s dreamy voice drifted over; she had only learned of the events minutes before, not having stayed in Slytherin House the previous night.

Blaise seemed to be considering. “Probably in the section about magical creatures.”

Holly nodded. “That does make sense. There was supposed to be a legendary monster in the chamber, and apparently, whatever it is, spiders flee from it.”

There was a collective consensus, and they all proceeded to look. However, hours passed, and they hunted through countless books, searching for the elusive reference. It was tough going, even with their rather large group, due to the sheer size of the magical creatures section, which had several hundred books. Madam Pince arrived just after ten, immediately surprised by the fact that students were actually in the library. She promptly kicked them all out, personally escorting them back to their Houses. Apparently, they were all supposed to remain in their dorms.

Over the next two weeks, their search was further hampered by the new restrictions that McGonagall placed. Students were no longer allowed to go around on their own, forced to move in packs. All Quidditch matches were cancelled as were all club meetings, study sessions, and any other extracurricular activities. Further, pupils were to remain within their own House whenever they were not in class, the Great Hall, or the library. This basically meant that Luna was all but forced from them.

McGonagall stated it was so they could keep track of the blonde, who had a tendency to wander aimlessly around the castle, but Holly wasn't so sure she believed the excuse. After all, Luna could have merely stayed in Slytherin with them, just like Gavin did. Instead, she was forced back to the Eagle House, to those who often teased and taunted her. Thankfully, though, the Gavin agreed to return as well to watch out for her, but that also meant he wouldn't be able to spend time with the Slytherins except in the Great Hall and class.

These restrictions also made it rather difficult to find any spiders, which Hogwarts now seemed to lack. Theo and Milli spent one memorable day attempting to chase after an entire hoard of the little blighters, but their plans had been derailed by a passing Lockhart. At least, with Hermione's attack the school stopped believing Holly

responsible for the entire mess. Apparently, everyone thought that the two girls were still close friends, and they couldn't see their saviour hurting one of her mates. And then, there was the fact that since they were unable to spend a great deal of time hunting after clues, the second-years now had plenty of time to study for exams.

Yet, despite all of their hardships, the Slytherins somehow found time to sneak off to the library. Surprisingly, they eventually managed to find a reference to the spiders, though it was a confusing one at best. Holly and Blaise had been digging through a text about ancient and legendary beasts, skimming by entries on the phoenix, sphinx, and Acromantula, when they had stumbled across a reference to the Basilisk:

Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it.

"A Basilisk?" Draco questioned, coming up to read from over Holly's shoulder.

She inclined her head. "It partially fits, and it's the best we have. Spiders flee from it, which is probably what Hagrid meant. I mean, the few spiders we've found seem to be leaving the castle." The green-eyed girl reread the entry. "Plus, it's a serpent, the symbol of Slytherin. Salazar would most likely choose a monster like that."

Blaise thoughtfully tapped his chin. "I vaguely remember Hagrid mentioning that something had killed off the school hens." He indicted part of the passage they had just read. "He thought it was a bugbear, but it might have been the Heir," the caramel-skinned boy said slowly.

"I know, but a Basilisk!" Draco stated loudly. "A bloody Basilisk. First, it's dragons, then it's a Cerberus, and now Basilisks! All we need now

is a hippogriff or better yet... an Acromantula. Knowing our luck, we'll find one." He waved his hand through the air.

"What's the big deal about a Basilisk?" Autumn asked walking over with Milli and Theo.

They had been attached by Draco's loud tone.

The blond rolled his eyes. "I'll tell you why it's a big deal. Put frankly, Basilisk kill things! They kill things very well and very easy," he explained carefully, albeit dramatically. "Looks can literally kill with them."

Autumn paled significantly, and Milli patted her back, shooting Draco a menacing look. He dismissed it with a wave. Theo and Blaise looked at each other nervously, the idea of a murderous serpent finally sinking in. However, Holly merely read the entry for a third time.

"Well," the girl interrupted, "it might not be a Basilisk." The others all stared at her, and she explained, "Like Draco said, Basilisks can kill with a gaze, but no one has died yet. Someone did fifty years ago but not this time around."

Blaise quickly caught on, "They were only Petrified. Not killed but Petrified."

"I don't think that Basilisks can do that," Milli put in after a moment, still rubbing Autumn's back.

Theo added, "Maybe if the glare was reflected or something, but what are the odds of that happening four times in a row."

"So it's not a Basilisk then?" Autumn asked hopefully, a gleam in her soft blue eyes.

"Who knows," the dark-haired girl answered. "But whatever it is, it can both kill and Petrify. I wonder what else it could do."

No one had an answer.

It was a day later that they caught a lucky break when Autumn saw a group of large spiders heading for the Forbidden Forest during Herbology. Immediately after classes ended, the Slytherin second-years gathered themselves in one of the study rooms, shooing a few first-years out. They mulled over the evidence, finally deciding that Holly, Blaise, and Draco were to go. The three were the best spell-casters. Plus, Holly would be able to woo any Basilisks that might attack them along the way, Draco knew a surprising amount of advanced curses, and Blaise was always useful to have around, not to mention the fact that he was fairly calm in the face of danger.

The trio escaped via use of Holly's Invisibility Cloak around midnight. They successfully managed to dodge the patrolling professors and to navigate their way to Hagrid's hut. Inside, Fang immediately hopped on Draco, sending the boy staggering into Blaise as Holly whipped off the cloak and put it on the table. They wouldn't need it in the dark forest.

The three lit their wands as they stepped out the back door, Fang leading the way. Draco spotted two spiders crawling rapidly across the forest floor, and Holly directed the large hound to follow them. She could feel a prickling in the back of her mind, the same feeling she had with her red-gold stalker, but it more distant now, almost muted. Emerald eyes flickered around, but even with the wand light, it was too dark to see anything save the faint outline of trees.

Minutes passed, and they wandered deeper into the forest, still following the spiders. Holly could feel soft whispers in the distance, but she had no idea who or what they were coming from. She heard the faint flapping of wings as they stepped off of the forest path. The trio exchanged looks, and the girl felt an incredible sense of foreboding as they went even deeper into the wood.

Suddenly, Holly felt a hoard of strange things quickly approaching them and mentally warned the boys. They turned to flee, but it was too late. The three were lifted off of their feet by large pinchers. Blaise choked, and both Holly and Draco let out girly shrieks. She silenced after a moment, though Draco screamed for a second longer, and the girl fought the urge to struggle against her captor. It was a wise move considering that she was at least ten metres off the ground, being

carried through the trees by what appeared to be an incredibly large spider. She held onto her wand, which was now darkened, for dear life.

They abruptly came into a clearing, the stars twinkling like mad above them. The three Slytherins and Fang were unceremoniously dropped to the forest floor, landing in a large heap. They scrambled to stand, finally getting a look at their surroundings. They were surrounded by dozens of spiders... dozens of incredibly **large** spiders.

Holly felt like she might faint on the spot; the two boys looked like they might, too.

One of the spiders that had captured them clicked its pincers, and Holly belated realised it was saying something.

“Aragog! Aragog!”

The Serpent’s attention switched to a large, dome-like web in front of them and the enormous spider that was crawling down it. It was huge, the size of a small elephant, though its eyes were clouded over like it was blind.

Holly was hit by another sense of foreboding, but she felt a flare of the red-gold presence. She mentally warned the other two.

“What is it?” Aragog answered with a few clicks.

“Humans.”

Aragog seemed interested, moving forward. “Is it Hagrid?”

“Strangers.”

Aragog turned away. “Kill them. I was sleeping...”

Draco let out a little squeak of terror, while Blaise’s dark eyes widened, and he stiffened. He made to move in front of Holly, the other boy going to protect her back from the circling spiders.

"We are friends of Hagrid," Holly quickly announced, her eyes glowing slightly.

There was a clack of the arachnids all around them.

Aragog hesitated, and he clicked, "Hagrid had never sent men into our hollow before."

Holly's eyes flashed. "He is in trouble. That's why we have come."

The biggest spider seemed to be considering. "In trouble, but why has he sent you?"

The girl lifted her chin, eyes glowing brightly enough to actually add light to the clearing. "Up at the school, they think that Hagrid has been attacking students.

Draco nodded and breathlessly put in, "They think that he has set loose a monster on them. They have taken him to Azkaban." Unconsciously, he reached for both of his friends.

The angry clicking of several dozen pincers filled the air.

"But that was years ago. Years and years ago," Aragog added after a moment. "I remember it well. That is why they made him leave the school. They believed that I was the monster that dwells in what they call the Chamber of Secrets. They thought that Hagrid opened the Chamber and set me free."

Blaise finally spoke, "And you didn't come from the Chamber of Secrets?"

Aragog looked angry at the presumption. "I? I was not born in the castle. I come from a distant land. A traveller gave me to Hagrid when I was an egg." He clicked his pincers in remembrance. "Hagrid was only a boy, but he cared for me, hidden in the cupboard in the castle, feeding me on scraps from the table. Hagrid is my good friend and a good man. When I was discovered and blamed for the death of a girl, he protected me. I have lived in the forest ever since, where Hagrid still visits me. He even found me a wife, Mosag, and you see how our family has grown, all through Hagrid's goodness..."

Draco breathed out in relief, his pale face gaining colour. "So you never... never attacked anyone?"

The old spider answered, "Never. It would have been my instinct, but out of respect for Hagrid, I never harmed a human. The body of the girl who was killed was discovered in a toilet. I never saw any part of the castle but the cupboard in which I grew up. Our kind like the dark and the quiet."

"Girl in a toilet," Holly murmured to herself. Something instantly occurred to her, separate threads linked in her mind.

'Myrtle...'

"Do you know what did kill that girl?" Blaise asked. Not having been privy to his friend's epiphany, he had continued. "Whatever it is, it's back--"

The spiders drowned out the rest of his statement.

"The thing that lives in the castle is an ancient creature we spiders fear above all others," Aragog responded in a strange tone. "Well do I remember how I pleaded with Hagrid to let me go, when I sensed the beast moving about the school." He seemed to tremble. "We do not speak of it! We do not name it! I never even told Hagrid the name of that dreaded creature, though he asked me many times."

Holly felt a shiver of fear at the arachnids continued response. Her foreboding only seemed to be increasing, and even the familiar red-gold presence could not calm it. She began to back away, silently telling Draco to grab Fang. He did, taking the hound's collar.

"Thank you then. We'll just be going," she tried to smile but couldn't manage it. The glow in her eyes continued to increase. Holly fingered her wand, which was partially up her sleeve.

Aragog almost laughed. "Go. I think not."

Holly felt another spike of uneasiness. She quietly released Draco, letting her wand drop into her hand. She didn't even need to urge her companions to go for theirs. Silently, the girl wished she had thought

to conjure Saladin and take him along for this little trek. His poisonous bite would be very useful right about now, though Holly didn't know how effective it would be against several dozen giant spiders.

"My sons and daughters do not harm Hagrid on my command, but I cannot deny them fresh meat, especially when it wanders so willingly into our midst." Aragog seemed momentarily saddened but quickly snapped out of it. "Goodbye, friend of Hagrid."

The other spiders moved in immediately. A solid wall of arachnids surrounded them.

Holly cast the first spell that came to mind, remembering what Aragog had said.

"Lumos!"

Unexpectedly, Blaise and Draco yelled it at the same moment. There was a brilliant flash of light, far brighter than anything Holly had managed before. The spiders shrieked, fumbling backwards in their semi-blinded state. She felt the red-gold presence gathering.

The girl announced loudly, "If you kill us, the people at the school will come for you. Our friends know that we're here, and they'll tell the adults. Even you and your children could not stand against the wrath of an angry hoard of witches and wizards," she warned, her eyes now blazing.

Aragog froze for a moment, obviously thinking over what she had said. However, he simply shrugged it off, and the others came at them again. Yet, his one moment of hesitation was all that was needed.

Unexpectedly, there was a burst of fire mid-air, and every head swivelled around to look. Holly took the opportunity and grabbed Blaise's hand, and he in turn snatched Draco's free one. She dashed off, dragging the two boys and the hound in her wake. They raced through the forest and away from the spiders, who had now recovered from their shock. The arachnids tore after them, but it was too late.

Fawkes the phoenix swooped in and grabbed the girl's arm, effortlessly lifting the three still connected second-years and the hound off of the ground.

The bird flew higher, soaring gracefully through the treetops before the spiders could even get off the ground. The forest was flashing by underneath them, Fawkes going at what should be impossible speeds.

Holly glanced back to ensure that they had everyone, which they did, only to see the trees racing by.

Within minutes, they were back at Hagrid's cabin, the phoenix lightly fluttering to the ground. Fang took off like a shot into the hut. The Slytherins warily collapsed to the ground, huddling together with Holly in the middle. Blaise was pressed to her side, his hands in hers, and Draco's arms were around her waist, his face buried in her hair. They were all trembling.

Fawkes flew over to her shoulder.

"Thank you so much, Fawkes," she breathed. The bird chirped happily and rubbed her face with his.

"Yes, thanks," Draco added breathlessly.

"Thank you," Blaise finished.

They sat in silence for a few moments, trying to quiet their racing hearts. Fawkes simply nuzzled Holly's neck before giving the same treatment to the boys.

Draco started to mumble to himself. It was something along the lines of "follow the spiders", he says."

Blaise grunted his agreement and rubbed his face in his hands.

The girl turned to the phoenix as he returned to her shoulder. "So it was you that has been following me all this time." It was a statement, not a question.

Fawkes gave an affirmative chirp.

Blaise and Draco looked up with surprise.

“Why?” Holly asked, wondering if it was actually possible for the bird to respond.

Fawkes merely gave her the phoenix equivalent of a sly smile and fluttered off of her shoulder and into the cabin. He returned within seconds, Holly’s cloak in his talons. The bird dropped into in her lap.

She got the hint.

“Fine.” The girl smiled, standing up.

Blaise and Draco followed, not even bothering to dust themselves off.

“Thank you again.”

And with that she flung the Invisibility Cloak around them. They started towards the castle, Fawkes following them all the way to the dungeons. Strangely, they ran into no one else, not even Professor Snape, along the way.

They were too tired to make the journey to Myrtle’s toilet that night, so the three decided to do it the next morning. They had a free time after Defence, and Lockhart was the least likely to escort students all the way to the dorms... or to notice if they went missing.

Milli, Theo, and Autumn acted as decoys, distracting the dandy and allowing the other trio to slip away as they passed by a corridor that led to the girl’s loo. Sneakily, Holly whipped out her ever useful cloak and covered them. The three Slytherins made it to the toilet and inside with no one the wiser, removing the cloak quickly so that the ghost wouldn’t see it.

Moaning Myrtle looked as they came up to her stall. “Oh, it’s you,” she stated when she saw Holly, who had used the loo several times before. “What do you want this time?”

Holly gave her a solemn look. "We wanted to ask you how you died," the girl said quietly, trying to project a sense of trustfulness to the spectre.

Myrtle immediately perked up, her entire demeanour changing in an instant. "Ooooh, it was dreadful," she commented dramatically, seeming incredibly flattered. "It happened right in here. I died in this very stall. I remember it so well. I'd hidden because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses..."

She blathered on for a few moments about the other girl, strangely mentioning a wedding. Blaise's eyes glazed over slightly, and Draco looked as though he wanted to politely but forcefully shift her back on topic. However, they couldn't risk offending her.

Finally, the ghost got back to the original question after Holly gave her a mental nudge.

"I was crying, and then, I heard somebody come in. They said something funny. A different language, I think it must have been," she added in an aside. "Anyway, what really got me was that it was a **boy** speaking. So I unlocked the door to tell him to go and use his own toilet, and then..." The spectre paused dramatically. "**I died.**"

Holly blinked. "How did you die?"

Myrtle shrugged. "No idea," she added loftily. "I just remember seeing a pair of great, big, yellow eyes. My whole body sort of seized up, and then, I was floating away..."

Afterwards, the Slytherins quickly thanked the ghost and left, lest they have to listen to her babble again. They travelled without problem to the Common Room, taking the cloak off in front of the portrait entrance. No one commented as they entered, and nobody would rat them out to a teacher for not staying with their year-mates. Nor would they comment on the fact that all of the second-years were gathering in the boys' dorm.

House solidarity was such a wonderful thing.

The others were quickly filled in, and they spent the next few hours before dinner speculating. After the meal, Holly finally returned to her room, lying on her bed. She retrieved the diary from her bedside table, swiftly relating the previous night's occurrences, which she had been too tired to tell him earlier. From there, it was rather natural for her to add what they had just learned from the ghost.

Eyes, Tom repeated after she had related her story. He had a distinctive sinking feeling. *Eyes did you say?*

He knew in that instant that it had to have been the Basilisk, that Myrtle's death truly was his fault.

Yes, Holly answered carefully, curious about his whirling thoughts, *she said it was a pair of "great, big, yellow eyes."*

A wave of pure shock erupted from the diary, and the girl was forced to rapidly throw up her mental shields.

Yellow... that can't be! The ink appeared so quickly that it was nearly a blur. *It can't be possible. It's simply impossible. But that means that it wasn't... It doesn't make any sense.* Tom seemed to simply be writing his every thought.

Tom, what are you talking about? Holly was completely confused. The impressions she was receiving were chaotic and disjointed.

However, he didn't seem to even notice she was writing to him. *But she had white eyes, not yellow. They always have white eyes, never yellow. It means that it couldn't have been her. It had to have been something else.*

Tom's mental spiel continued for several moments, slowly calming as he accepted the bizarre revelation. Finally, he responded to the girl again.

Please, forgive me, Holly. It just surprised me greatly. I had believed one thing for so long, and now, I know that it wasn't true. I had thought that I...

Tom? Holly was now exceptionally worried.

*It's just that I...*The writing paused for a moment before continuing.
Holly, do you trust me?

She hesitated, thinking about it.

Yes.

And she did. She truly did, despite the fact that he was a diary and that she had never had a clear mental reading of him. Holly did trust Tom.

Yes. Yes, *I do.*

If Tom would have been able to, he would have inhaled sharply. *Write my name in the air with your wand.*

It was his moment of truth. It was time to tell her everything. He had been wrong for so long. He had felt so guilty, and with his new revelation, it was time to make things right.

What?

He responded with building nervousness. *Please, just do it. Then, rearrange the letters.* Tom again paused. *I just ask that afterwards... give me a chance to explain.*

Holly climbed off of her bed and pulled the curtains around her study space. She politely did as they diary-wizard asked, carefully writing the letters in the air.

Tom Marvolo Riddle.

She waved her wand... and gasped.

I am Lord Voldemort.

AN: Most of the dialogue from the first section and scene with Aragog is taken directly from canon.

Also, what is legal age in Britain? Is it seventeen or eighteen?

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks

Chapter Twenty-Two: Riddle in the Dark

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Twenty-Two: Riddle in the Dark

"So let me get this straight," Draco began, pacing back and forth in the space between Blaise's and his bed. "You accidentally put your soul in a diary when you were only trying to make a memory?" He gestured with his hand. "And not only that, but you can actually hear us when we talk as long as the diary is open?" He flung himself down next to Luna.

If Tom had been able to, he would have sighed. *Obviously*, he answered the second question with a hint of sarcasm, *since you aren't writing, and I can still understand you. To the first part...* He paused, not sure what to say.

"Tom?" Blaise prompted several moments later, the ensouled diary not yet writing anything else. He leaned closer to Holly, who was holding the book, so that he could see better.

Well, it wasn't all of my soul, he finally responded, the red ink appearing slowly. *It was only about 7/8 of it. The rest remained in my body, but it wasn't really enough to technically be considered a soul. It had no conscience, no morals. It mostly seemed to be a duplicate of my memories with a few other things thrown in. It was more like the memory I actually wanted to put in the diary, except it had part of my soul and stayed in my body instead.* The words stopped for a moment, as though Tom was remembering. *It didn't even want to reintegrate with me. It knew what had happened, but it simply sealed me in the diary and put me to sleep.*

"You're only sort of a soul?" Luna asked with confusion. She nervously played with the hem of her robe, occasionally blinking her too large eyes.

Well, I am not really "sort of a soul"... I'm not even sure if that is even possible. It's one of those things where you either have one or you don't.

"So I'm guessing that you do," Draco cut in, a strange tone evident in his voice. He seemed somewhat shell-shocked, as if it truly hadn't sunken in yet, and he was only going through the motions.

Though to be fair, the same could really be said of Blaise and Luna. The two were staring at the diary with glazed expressions, the blonde occasionally blinking her impossibly large eyes and the boy rubbing his face tiredly. They both seemed too stunned to really process what was going on, looking to all the world like they had been hit with repeated hexes and were Confunded.

Only Holly was spared from the shock of it all, mostly due to the fact that she had heard a big portion of the explanation earlier. To say that she had been initially surprised by Tom's revelation was an understatement of epic proportions. The green-eyed Slytherin had sat numbly as he had made his confessions, not really intending to hear him out but too confused to move.

That had been just an hour earlier, and she had immediately gone to her closest friends, the only ones that knew of the diary, telling them what she had learned. So here they were, on Blaise bed, with the door spelled shut and an Alarm charm on it. The other second-year boys were downstairs in the Common Room, Draco having given them some bogus excuse to keep them from the room for the next hour or so.

Blaise questioned, recovering, "And what about the attacks? Now and fifty years ago? By your own confession, you were the one that found the Basilisk, so were you involved with everything else?" The brunet moved closer to Holly, the better to see the diary's answer.

No, but I thought I was. I was the one that awakened the Basilisk, but not to harm people. I just wanted to talk to her; she knew Salazar himself. He hesitated, clearly debating telling them something.

However, Tom eventually decided to get it out in the open as well.

I didn't really have many friends at Hogwarts, none that knew I was a Parselmouth, none that I was really close with. My Housemates tried, but I just couldn't really connect with them. We had little common ground outside of magic, and none of the other Houses would ever give a Slytherin the chance. I... I just wanted to have someone to talk to, he finished, the ink slightly fainter than usual. His mind swirled with regret and other nameless emotions.

The lone Ravenclaw added very softly, "What about Myrtle? Are you responsible for that?"

She – Myrtle – she died... and I panicked, Tom confessed, the script speeding up as he wrote. It was as if he was showing the awful truth as quickly as possible so that he wouldn't have to think about it for longer than absolutely necessary.

Holly empathised with him; she wouldn't want to hold on to the horror either.

He went on after a moment, *I thought for sure that it was the Basilisk, but I couldn't tell anyone what had happened. I'd have to explain, and there was no telling what they would do to me, especially since I'm a Parselmouth. They would have expelled me and sent me to Azkaban... or worse – back to the orphanage.* The script on the page was erratic and distorted as Tom added the last bit, almost like he was trembling.

The writing paused for a few heartbeats, like he was trying to catch his breath. *But I knew of Hagrid's pet,* Tom added slowly. *I had seen him with it during my Prefect rounds. I hoped that it really had been the spider, so I turned Hagrid in. I really didn't have any other choice. I couldn't go back to the orphanage. You know that, Holly. I couldn't go back,* he added, the text turning very faint, like Tom was whispering.

I just couldn't.

Both girls shuddered as he unintentionally sent out an intense feeling of anguish.

I couldn't, not permanently. The writing was so light now that it was barely a shadow on the page. *I wouldn't have survived to be eighteen.*

The text stopped for a moment, and a shiver went up Holly's spine as she thought about what Tom had written. She knew the gist of Tom's stay at the orphanage, but she didn't delude herself into thinking that she knew the entire terrible truth. Still, to hear him put it like that shown new light on the entire situation, shoving the true horror into the spotlight.

Besides, the attacks stopped after Hagrid was expelled and his pet fled the castle. It truly might have been them, the diary-wizard inserted with a hint of hope.

“Or the real attacker wised up,” Draco commented with a sniff.

Tom seemed chagrined. *That, too.*

“But how do you know it wasn’t the Basilisk?” Blaise finally asked the question they had all been wondering.

Eyes, Tom wrote simply, as if it explained anything. *Its eyes.*

Draco snorted, gazing at the diary as though it might spring up and suddenly attack at any moment. “Well, that makes as much sense as one of Weasley’s Potions essays.”

He crossed his arms over his chest defensively. Apparently, the knowledge that he was talking to a younger version of Voldemort was now starting to sink in.

“Come again?” Holly queried in a much politer tone. She wasn’t really sure what to do about Draco, not that she could blame his attitude. She was still somewhat jumpy around Tom herself.

Basilisks have white eyes! Tom replied with enthusiasm, clearly excited about something.

The sole Ravenclaw blinked. “What’s that supposed to mean?” Luna questioned, obviously not understanding.

However, in that moment, something occurred to Holly. “Yellow. Myrtle said that she saw yellow eyes, not white.” The girl looked at each of her friends in turn. “If she is correct, then it couldn’t have possibly been the Basilisk. It was either Aragog... or something else.”

“Oh, right,” Draco put in sarcastically. “Just how many dangerous beasts do you think are roaming around this castle?”

Holly glanced at him but didn’t respond. She was thinking the same thing herself.

Blaise pinched the bridge of his nose in thought. "How could you know that they have white eyes? If you looked, **you'd have died**," the boy questioned with heavy emphasis.

I didn't need to. Tom continued easily, *Salazar Slytherin wrote it down. It was in one of his journals. If anyone would know, it would be him.*

The four students took a moment to process this new titbit of information.

"How do we know that you're telling the truth?" Blaise asked, making eye contact with Holly.

For one, I never had to tell you in the first place.

The brunet inclined his head in a slight sign of agreement. "That's true enough."

For another, Holly and Luna would be able to tell if I was lying.

"Wait," Draco put in. "How do you know about that?"

Remember, I can hear what's going on around whenever the diary is open. And you lot certainly aren't quiet about it when you think no one's listening.

The four students blinked.

"We'll have to work on that," Luna said faintly. "Perhaps the flying wimplewambles will help us," she added a moment later, studying the interesting pattern of shadows on the ceiling.

Holly sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Anyway... he seems honest enough to me."

The other witch nodded absentmindedly, now braiding her hair.

"Why shouldn't we go to McGonagall or Professor Snape with this and let them sort it all out then?" Draco asked cautiously.

However, it was Luna who answered in Tom's place.

"We don't know what they would do to him. They could destroy the diary outright without giving us a chance to explain properly." She sighed slightly, still braiding her hair. "We can't turn Tom in, especially if he's innocent," the Ravenclaw whispered, leaning forward so that only he could hear. "Tom would be punished, perhaps even die – when he didn't really do anything worse than make a bad decision. Besides, Holly would have to explain about the diary and her telepathy. Her very life could be in danger if the Ministry learned of either. They'd label her an up and coming Dark Lady, a follower of You-Know-Who's footsteps."

The blond Slytherin eyed her for a moment before nodding. "Fine then." He hesitated, rubbing his chin in thought. "So if he's telling the truth, it wasn't the Basilisk that was attacking people and probably not Aragog either. I've never heard of an Acromantula with the power to petrify," Draco finished carefully, addressing everyone.

Holly murmured, more to herself than to them, "So Hagrid really is innocent then."

Tom didn't respond, not knowing how. At the smallest Slytherin's forlorn look, Blaise reached over to take her hand, giving it a fierce squeeze.

Draco tapped his cheek with his finger. "And the whole deal with the Heir, what was that about?"

Tom hesitated, thinking it over. *The nearest I can tell is that it was meant to be a distraction, something to keep the faculty from focusing on the real culprit. I know that I certainly wasn't doing it, so it had to be the real culprit trying to pass on the blame.*

Somehow, Holly managed to put two and two together, getting seventeen, and a little stab of agony shot through her at the realisation.

"You're the Heir of Slytherin then, and you know the location of the Chamber of Secrets," the girl said. "That's how you found the Basilisk; it really is Slytherin's legendary monster."

Holly felt an internal sting of anguish. She had been searching from the Heir for months now, and Tom had known all along without even trusting her enough to tell her.

The other students momentarily looked at Holly as if she had grown another head, but slowly, their shock was replaced by comprehension.

Yes.

“Where?”

The ink appeared very slowly. *Under the school, but the entrance is elsewhere... the girl's loo. One of the taps doesn't work. The red writing flowed onto the page in a rush. It has a snake etched on it. You just need to whisper in Parseltongue, and the entrance will open.*

“The same toilet Myrtle was killed in,” the dark-haired girl stated, not needing Tom’s confirmation.

Draco sighed then. “It doesn’t really matter now, though. If the Basilisk isn’t doing it, then, the Chamber stuff is a ruse. Whoever is doing the attacks was trying to throw us off.”

“So, basically, we’re back to square one,” the other boy put in with an unhappy sigh.

It was his turn to receive a hand-squeeze from Holly.

“Maybe not,” she stated. “We know that the real culprit has an idea of where the entrance to the Chamber is, unless he or she is a very good guesser.”

Draco’s face lit up. “That’s right. They’d have to know since that’s where they killed Myrtle, and they wrote the message about the Heir on the wall outside.”

“Also, we have managed to eliminate several suspects; we just need to re-examine all the facts,” the odd Eagle went on in Holly’s place, now finished with her hair. “Surely, we can find some new clue from it.” Luna glanced at one of the multiple watches that she wore. “But

not tonight. Curfew starts in a little bit. I have to be back soon. Professor Flitwick does a count every evening.”

The three Slytherins exchanged a look.

“We’ll go with you. Nobody should be roaming around alone,” the Slytherin girl replied quietly.

“Actually,” Blaise inserted, making direct eye contact with his best friend, “I think that you should stay, Holly. Draco and I will be fine on our own. Tom and you should get started on re-examining everything. Every moment counts, you know.”

His unspoken words were, “Tom and you have some things to work out... **in private.**”

Holly blinked. “Fine,” she allowed, knowing it was the truth. “I’ll stay here and wait for you to return then.” She fought the urge to fidget, instead frowning.

“Good,” Draco responded. He offered his arm to Luna. “Shall we go, my lady?”

She took it with a slight smile, instantly joining in the dramatics. “Yes, we shall, silver knight. We will have to make haste as it is.”

The pair rose, as did Blaise, and made for the door.

“Goodnight, Holly,” Luna said, Draco also adding his farewell, too.

The other boy lingered for a moment, inclining his head at the diary. “Bye, Hols. I’ll see you in a bit.”

With that, he also departed.

She simply stared after him, not really wanting to talk to Tom at the moment. However, her desire for answers got the best of her, and Holly looked down.

Are you mad? The words were already on the page when she finally looked back at it. *Please, don't be mad, Holly,* Tom pleaded after she didn't respond.

How he managed to sound so very lost and alone without actually speaking was beyond her.

"I'm not," she answered honestly. "I'm just..."

Bothered, he supplied. *Feeling betrayed,* Tom tried again after she didn't reply.

"Maybe..." Holly shook her head, not wanting to continue. However, the feelings that had been boiling just under the surface ever since his confession refused to still, rising up suddenly.

"Yes!" And her eyes glowed green. "Yes, I'm mad, bothered... **feeling betrayed.** You didn't lie to me, not outright, but it was more a sin of omission," she accused, fighting to keep the hurt from her voice and not quite succeeding. "You knew what **he** did to my family, to me! You knew! All this time, I trusted you, and you knew." She made an angry gesture at the diary, a detached part of her wondering if he could actually see it. "I didn't have to, and I don't trust easily... **but I still trusted you.**"

Her breath was quickening as her voice rose. "I told you things about me, my life, that I have never told anyone. Things that no one else knows, not even Blaise." Holly had the sudden urge to throw something... anything... preferably the diary. "And you know so much about me, most of my secrets. You know what I am! You know about it all. The Parseltongue," she hissed. "And the telepathy," the girl added in a much quieter but still deadly tone. "I didn't even get a chance to tell you about it; you didn't earn it like the others. You just eavesdropped; you spied on me!"

She shut her eyes tightly as she felt the first prickle of moisture. She wouldn't allow the tears to fall; she just wouldn't. Holly hadn't cried all the years she had been mistreated by the Dursleys, all those years she had been used by them, so she wouldn't allow it to happen now over such a little thing like betrayal.

“You’re just like them, you know!” the girl practically screamed at him, trying to redirect her emotions to a different outlet, but with the continued prickling in her eyes, she knew it wasn’t working. “You pretend to be my friend, but all this time you were just using me!”

Holly felt awash of pain from the book.

I’m your friend, Holly. I really am. Please believe me. Tom was begging her now. I was just... I was afraid. I feared how you would react. How was I supposed to tell you about all this? What could I possibly say to make it easier to hear? he added faintly, collapsing in on himself.

However, she didn’t answer. She was too focused on trying to contain the building hurt in her chest.

I’m sorry, Holly. I am so very sorry.

If Tom had been able to, he would have wept.

“Yes, well, sorry isn’t good enough,” she finally choked out, losing the battle with herself.

And with that, Holly began to cry. Her tiny body heaved with her racking sobs as she put her face in her hands.

Holly...

But she just ignored him, or maybe she just simply didn’t notice the writing due to her tears. She wrapped her arms around herself tightly, her head bowed over the diary. Her tears dropped from her face to the pages below, smearing the vivid, red ink and causing it to run.

Holly felt a spike of emotion from Tom; he knew that she was crying. She could feel his remorse in the back of her mind, but she was too upset currently to really care. So what if he was sorry? He shouldn’t have betrayed her in the first place.

Why did everyone keep doing this to her? What had she done to deserve this? What was wrong with her? What made this happen?

What... what she really wanted, **needed** right now was Blaise.

Luna or Draco would be nice, but they didn't know her as her best friend did. They hadn't yet had the opportunity, Luna due to the newness of their relationship and Draco because of the previous year. But Blaise knew; he would understand why she hurt so very much right now.

Her weeping intensified at the thought, knowing there was no way he could possibly know she was upset unless she went looking for him or tried to telepathically contact him. However, given her current mental state, neither was an option. He probably wouldn't be back for a while, she had a sneaking suspicion he would wait in the Common Room to give her more time to talk to Tom.

But she really needed him, now more than ever. She needed him. She needed to be held, to be consoled.

As if summoned by her very thoughts, Holly felt a pair of arms wrap around her. She jumped, not having sensed anyone behind her; the girl hadn't even heard the door open, and she was in a near panic before she finally realised who it was.

Blaise.

She instantly relaxed, burying her head in his chest. Holly didn't even bother to question why he was there, not then at least. She simply continued to weep out her frustrations and agony.

Minutes... perhaps hours later, Holly began to calm, her sobs turning into sniffles and her tears slowing to a trickle. She didn't move from her position on Blaise's shoulder, where he had moved her head without her even noticing. His arms were still around her, patting her back gently instead of just squeezing her.

More time passed, and she belatedly noted that he was singing to her softly, so softly that she couldn't make out the words. She barely even heard the general melody, but for the moment, it didn't really seem to matter. He could have been singing "God Save the Queen" for all Holly cared at the moment; it was just nice to be comforted like this, like he really did love her, care about her wellbeing.

Blaise's song ended, and he was about to start another when she sat up slowly. Holly rubbed her gritty and tired eyes.

From underneath her eyelashes, she looked at him. "What are you doing here? I mean, why. Shouldn't you still be with Luna? How did you..." the girl trailed off.

Blaise didn't even pause, now rubbing her back instead of patting it. "You called me." He smiled at her, his eyes glittering strangely.

"I... what?"

His smile widened, and she could see perfectly white teeth. "You called me. I don't how, but I could feel your distress. I knew that you needed me. I ran all the way back from Ravenclaw Tower. Draco did, too, but he didn't want to crowd you."

"Oh."

And the pair fell into silence.

"Are you all right now?" the boy asked several moments later as he stilled his hands.

"Yes. I... thank you, Blaise," she murmured softly.

He grinned again. "*De nada, amorcita*" The boy tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear before pressing a kiss to her forehead.

Holly flushed red, embarrassment building now that she had calmed. The girl lifted a slightly shakily hand to her head, rubbing it tiredly over her face. She felt empty now, hollow, like her emotions had eaten away at her insides and her outburst had gotten rid of the rest.

And she was tired, so very tired. Much like how she used to feel after she had done a day's worth of chores only to be thrown in the cupboard afterwards without even a slice of bread for her efforts. She felt like lying down and sleeping for the next year or so, but even that probably wouldn't be enough.

And why did this seem to keep happening? For the nine years she was at the Dursleys before Hogwarts, Holly could count the number of times she cried on both hands and still have fingers left over. But in just this year alone, she had been reduced to sobs twice, Blaise comforting her both times.

A squeeze of her shoulder interrupted her thoughts and caused her to glance up at her friend, who was eyeing her worriedly. However, Blaise's intent-filled and suspicious gaze made her hastily look down.

"Do you think we should tell someone? Maybe Professor Flitwick?" Holly questioned after a moment, trying to fill the somewhat awkward silence and distract his attention away from her shakiness.

He exhaled slowly. "Perhaps... but not for now. As bizarre as Tom's story sounds, I believe he's telling the truth. He didn't even have to mention his connection to the Dark Lord; we would never have known otherwise. Besides, if he was lying, I think that he could come up with something a bit more plausible."

She couldn't help herself as she let out a chuckle. "I had considered that," the girl inserted, looking up at him again with a smile, but it slowly slid off her face. "I really meant it before. Thank you, Blaise."

The boy inclined his head, noting her still trembling hands. "You can stay here tonight... if you want," he offered tentatively, patting her hand gently. "Like you did during Yule."

Holly blinked. "Er... thanks... but I don't think that would be a good idea." She shifted nervously.

Blaise looked at her for a moment. "The others wouldn't mind." He added, guessing what she was thinking, "And they wouldn't mention it to anyone."

She shook her head, not quite meeting his eyes. "Again, thank you... but no. I really don't think it'd be a good idea, Blaise."

The boy shrugged, sliding off his bed. "If you're sure?" He offered her a hand up.

"I am." Holly flushed brightly as he gave her another hug, one that lingered for several moments. "Goodnight," she said slowly before walking to the door and disappearing into the hallway.

Blaise starred after her, reaching over to close the still opened diary with a sharp snap. He glared at the book for several moments, tempted to set the bloody thing on fire and just be done with it, but he fought away the feeling before opening the drawer to his bedside table and putting it there out of sight.

But not out of mind.

Holly refused to take the diary back the next morning, and it was still lying in Blaise's bedside table. She was too upset to deal with Tom at the moment, so upset that she needed the kind of comfort that he usually offered her. However, since she wasn't talking to him yet, she instead conjured Saladin, hiding him under her robe.

They were late heading down to breakfast, but it was just in time to hear the good news from Professor McGonagall.

"Professor Sprout has informed me that the Mandrakes are ready for cutting at last," the acting-headmistress announced over the now silenced student body. "Tonight, we will be able to revive those people who have been Petrified. I need hardly remind you all that one of them may well be able to tell us who, or what, attacked them. I'm hopeful that this dreadful year will end with our catching the culprit."

The Great Hall practically exploded with cheering. Holly and her three friends from the previous night let out identical sighs of relief.

"Well, I guess that means the mystery will be solved without us," Milli stated dejectedly from beside Draco after it had quieted. She scowled down at her eggs.

Theo aggressively speared his tomato. "Probably, but it's good that they are getting better. Even creepy Creevey, I guess," he added in with an unhappy expression.

“And Granger, too,” Draco inserted himself, looking equally miserable with the thought. He glanced at Holly, who wasn’t even paying any attention to her own Housemates.

Instead, her attention was focused on the Gryffindor table. Holly cocked her head to the side, trying to get a mental feel of a trembling Ginny Weasley. However, with so many other minds around it was impossible, especially since the Slytherin was not well acquainted with the girl. So she merely settled for watching as the redhead sat down next to a relieved Ron and Neville. The first-year fidgeted nervously and leaned forward to tell them something, looking over her shoulder anxiously and making sure no one else was listening.

She opened her mouth to speak, only to jolt out of her seat as Percy moved in next to her. Ginny scampered away, Holly’s eyes following in her wake.

“What do you see?” a voice whispered in her ear, and the telepath jumped.

“What... Blaise,” she stated, trying to still her rapidly beating heart. “Nothing much. Just Ginny acting strangely... well, more strangely than usual,” Holly corrected, narrowing her eyes. “I think that she might know something.”

Luna idly chewed on her very burnt toast. “Really? Do you think that she knows who did it?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure.” Holly tapped her fingers on the tabletop. “I’ve been thinking,” she started, gaining the attention of everyone around her. “I think that we should tell Professor Flitwick what we know. About **everything** we know,” she finished, giving Blaise a subtle but significant look.

“Why Professor Flitwick?” Gavin asked, leaning in. He had seen the look, filing it away with the dozen other strange things Holly Potter did daily.

Pansy chimed in, buttering her bread, “Why Flitwick and not Professor Snape?” She paused as she realised that her butter was oddly purple, having been hexed by Theo when she wasn’t looking.

“Why not McGonagall?” Cynthia asked, adding in her three Knuts worth. “She’s in charge right now.”

Blaise answered for Holly, “He’s the most likely to believe us. Plus, McGonagall would put the blame on us, and Professor Snape... well, his loyalties are still in question.” He shrugged. “We don’t really know Professor Sprout very well.”

Theo nodded emphatically. “I agree. We need to tell someone. Too bad Dumbledore is gone.” He took a sip of juice, immediately choking, Pansy having charmed it into vinegar.

“Who will tell him?” Milli questioned.

“I’ll do it,” Holly volunteered quickly. “I can use my cloak.”

“And me,” Blaise inserted.

Draco added in, “Me, too.”

The other second-years exchanged glances.

“Why not Luna or Gavin?” Autumn asked from Milli’s other side.

The dark-skinned boy answered, “We won’t see him until tonight when he does the head count. Holly, Blaise, and Draco will be able to use the cloak to sneak away and talk to him before then.”

“Plus, we have McGonagall today, and Lockhart escorts all her classes around since she’s too busy,” Theo contributed with a smirk, now drinking from Gavin’s glass. “He’ll be dead easy to get away from.” He winked at them.

Sure enough, Theo was right. It was, in fact, very easy to get away from Lockhart. Just as they had done before to visit Myrtle, they lingered near the back of the group, whipping on the Invisibility Cloak at an opportune moment and heading into the staff room.

However, they never got the chance to talk to the teachers. They had barely been waiting inside for five minutes when McGonagall ordered

everyone back to their Common Rooms. Worried, the trio darted into the wardrobe, listening as the teachers filled in.

"It has happened," McGonagall announced in a tired and very shaky voice. "A student has been taken by the monster. Right into the Chamber itself."

Professor Flitwick let out a little shriek, exchanging horrified glances with Sprout.

Professor Snape asked thickly, "How can you be sure?" He gripped the arms of his chair so tightly that his knuckles were now white.

"The Heir of Slytherin left another message, right underneath the first one." The Transfiguration teacher breathed in heavily, her face very pale. "*Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever.*"

Holly heard the sound of muffled weeping, but she didn't need to hear McGonagall answer the next question. She already knew who it was.

Ginny Weasley.

They sat dazedly in the boys' dorm that night, blankly staring at one another. Virtually the entire House was in the Common Room, though some were in the study rooms or the dorms, so the second-years had taken refuge there as well. Gavin and Luna were currently absent, having been forced back to Ravenclaw Tower by a livid and obviously frightened McGonagall.

"Blimey," Theo mumbled from his spot on his bed after an incalculable amount of time had passed. "I feel horrible."

Milli squeezed his shoulder, eyes very moist. "Me, too. Sure, the Weaslette was weird and annoying, but that doesn't mean she deserves to rot away in the Chamber forever."

"No, she doesn't," Holly said weakly from Blaise's bed with her head bowed. "If only we had said something sooner." She quietly stroked the sleeve of her robe.

Saladin, who was hidden underneath, rubbed his little head on her wrist.

Blaise bit his lip, putting a hand on her shoulder. "We can still say something now."

Holly glanced up at him.

"To who? How?" Draco questioned, running a hand through his hair.

The caramel-skinned looked back at his best friend with resolve. "Lockhart. He did say that he knows where the Chamber is and will try to rescue her. And we can use the cloak and the passages Holly found."

"Lockhart... that fraud! He can barely hold his wand half the time," Draco stated, waving his hands in the air. He rose and began to pace. "What about Professor Flitwick? We could go to him."

Holly exhaled slowly, knowing that they had to try. "I know the Lockhart is useless, but it's the best we've got. We could go to Professor Flitwick, but I'm not sure how much help he'll be. Remember, he's with Sprout, Snape, and Madam Pomfrey working on the necessary charms for the Petrification cure." She shrugged helplessly. "We definitely know that Lockhart is going to make a go of it, even if it's only to prove that he isn't a completely worthless ponce." The girl gestured for emphasis. "Besides, with Professor Snape in the Hospital Wing, the dandy is closer than anyone else. And if not him, we can try to get her ourselves."

"Go for her themselves?" Theo mouthed to Milli and Gavin with wide eyes.

"That's what it sounded like to me," the heavy-set girl whispered back, "but how do they know where to go?"

However, the other trio continued with noticing their conversation.

"And what are we going to tell him?" Draco questioned, his voice quieting. "Are we going to him about the..." The blond stopped his pacing.

The smallest Slytherin nodded and stood.

Draco watched her for a moment, running his hand through his hair again. "Fine. We'll go," he murmured, now looking at Blaise.

"Tell him about what?" Milli interrupted fiercely. She like the rest of the second-years had been watching the three-way exchange like they were three Chasers with the Quaffle. "What are you telling him about?"

However, they didn't answer. Instead, Blaise rose, too. The three of them heading for the door, but not before Holly removed a book from Blaise's bedside table and pocketed it.

It was her diary, Milli noted.

"You know something," Theo accused, also standing and moving to intercept them. "You know something that you aren't telling us."

Holly gazed up at him. "Yes, we do, but there isn't time. We have to go, but I promise to tell you when we get back." She gave him a pleading expression. "Please."

"Not until you tell us," Milli inserted, also moving in their path.

In that moment, Holly realised just how much larger the other girl was.

Blaise urged, "We will, but there isn't any time." His face was pleading with them to understand.

"Then. we're going with you," Gavin joined in. "You can tell us on the way."

"We won't all fit under the cloak. It can only cover three of us at a time," Draco objected, shivering with agitation. "If you go, they'll stop us and send us back before we can even explain."

"We need you to do something else for us instead," Holly stated suddenly. "You should go to Professor Flitwick; you'll probably have to take one of the Prefects with you. Please tell him that we figured

out where the Chamber is; that we're going to tell Lockhart." She blinked up at them hopefully. "This way, they'll know what's going on.

Theo blinked, indecision written on his face as he glanced between them. However, he nodded and moved away, not saying anything. Milli and Gavin did the same, standing to the side and silently watching as the others donned the cloak and slipped out the door. Afterwards, they exchanged a look before going to do as Holly had asked.

Meanwhile, Holly and the two boys exited the Slytherin passageways two corridors down from Lockhart's office, hurrying to it. The dark-haired girl fingered the diary in her pocket as they went.

They paused just outside the door, and Holly hesitantly opened the diary to talk to Tom and question him more on the Chamber. However, she was distracted by the thoughts of the man inside, and her face hardened, expression darkening considerably, quite an accomplishment given the already angry look on it.

Green eyes blazed.

Blaise opened his mouth to ask her what was the matter, but she beat him to it.

"That bastard is leaving!" She snarled, nostrils flaring in a very terrifying manner, "He's running away. He isn't even going to try."

"What!" the other two exclaimed together.

"He's leaving... he's leaving Ginny to die!" Holly looked well and truly enraged as she forgetfully shoved the book into her pocket, not noticing that it was still partially opened. She fingered her wand, the other two looking at her with wild eyes.

Blaise and Draco exchanged a look over her head, their shock being replaced by anger. A moment of understanding passed between them, and both smirked, also going for their wands.

"Well, we can't have that now, can we?" the brunet questioned rhetorically.

"No, we can't," the blond responded with false sweetness.

Holly stared up at them, noting their expressions. "We'll just have to take him to the Chamber with us then, won't we?"

"Yes."

"Of course."

The girl smiled as she sent a spell at the door. The dandy's back was to them as they entered, and he was packing a trunk. All of his belongs were scattered nearby, not even his portraits remained on the wall.

Lockhart heard his door open with a slam and whirled around.

"Going somewhere, Professor?" Draco asked dangerously, his wand pointed unerringly at the man.

Holly circled him from the side. "Leaving are we, sir?" she asked, and he twirled to look at her.

Blaise went around the other side. "More like running away."

Lockhart turned to face the other boy.

"Ah... well, you see," the dandy stuttered, staring at the tips of three separate wands.

"Yes, we do see," the lone girl carried on. "You have been lying all this time about your exploits. But now, that there is a real test of your courage... you are fleeing, running away in the middle of the night like some frightened dog."

Lockhart began to sweat. "Er... you see... What d'you want me to do?" he whined suddenly. "I don't know where the Chamber is. There's nothing I can do," he defended in a petulant voice.

"You are in luck then, Professor," Holly said evenly. "We have discovered where the Chamber is, and what's inside."

Blaise's smirk widened. "And we're going to show it to you, so now, you can help us rescue Ginny Weasley. After all, it is the least you can do after teaching us nothing but rubbish all year!" He dark brown eyes glinted dangerously.

The dandy blinked, looking for all the world like he was about to cry. His eyes darted from one student to the next, and Holly could hear exactly where his thoughts were going. The professor brushed a bead of sweat from his forehead, nervously flexed his hands, and then made a fatal mistake; he went for his wand.

"*Expelliarmus!*" the three Slytherins shouted at the same time, sending the professor flying through the air and into his trunk.

His things scattered on the impact. Draco nimbly caught the man's wand, snapping it in half before flinging the remains out a conveniently open window.

"Tut, tut," he stated with condescension

"You shouldn't have let Professor Snape teach us that one," Holly said in a deceptively calm voice.

Blaise laughed. "Too true." He turned back to the fallen teacher. "Now up!"

He forced the man to his feet and out the door, marching him all the way to Myrtle's loo. They had no need of the cloak; after all, they had a teacher with them. But just the same, Blaise pocketed it.

They rounded a corner, the loo visible at the end. Lockhart froze outside the door, and Holly shoved him inside with her free hand. He landed unceremoniously in a large puddle by one of the sinks.

"Hello, Myrtle," the girl called out, accidentally trodding on the ponce's protruding fingers as she went by.

The ghost stuck her head through one of the stall doors. "Oh, it's you again." She glanced at Holly before sweeping her gaze over the rest of them, halting as she noticed Draco.

“Yes, it is, my fine lady,” the blond intoned with a winning smile.

Myrtle blinked at him stupidly.

“We came to ask you again about the day you died.”

Blaise nodded forcefully from the back of the group. “More specifically about how. You said you saw a pair of eyes,” he prompted, watching Lockhart like a hawk out of the corner of his eye.

Myrtle finally looked away from the blond Slytherin. “Oh, yes, I did. They were somewhere over there,” she said, pointing near the sink in front of her stall door. “I heard someone come in just before, and I was going to tell him to go away – at least, I think it was a boy. He spoke in a funny language, so I can’t really be sure.”

“Thank you,” Holly responded, moving over to the tap and examining it.

Draco joined her, while the other Slytherin watched Lockhart, who was trembling like a frightened child.

“But it sounded fuzzy,” Myrtle went on absentmindedly. “Almost like he was far away... or a recording.” She floated to the side to get a better look at what Holly and Draco were doing.

The boy nudged his friend, indicating a tiny serpent etched on one of the pipes. “Just like Tom said,” he whispered. “Say something in Parseltongue,” Draco added, moving back to distract Myrtle from what she was about to do.

Holly eyed the craving, feeling Saladin coil tighter around her wrist. “**Open,**” she hissed, moving back as the wall did just that. There was now a blackened hole where the sink had once been, and only incredibly large pipes were visible.

The three males stepped up behind her, awestruck.

The dandy momentarily forgot his fear. “Amazing,” he muttered, regretfully drawing attention to himself.

Draco smirked evilly and took a step back. "You can go first," he stated, shoving Lockhart forward.

The man wheeled his arms through the air for a second before unceremoniously falling in face first, sliding down the pipe. The three Slytherins merely looked over the edge after him. Blaise moved forward first, lowering himself onto the pipe and sliding out of sight. Holly went next with Draco bringing up the rear.

She slid down the slimy surface at an impossible angle for several moments before the pipe levelled off. The girl could feel the rapid approach of Blaise's mind, so she was prepared when she shot of the end, landing on a soft cushion. It took Holly a second to realise her cushion was none other than her professor when she rolled to her feet, moving out of Draco's way just in time.

He also landed on the dandy, causing the man to groan in pain. The boy climbed to his feet with a slight sneer, prodding the professor with his foot.

"We must be miles under the school," Holly whispered to Blaise as the boy came up to her right, crunching as he walked. She didn't even want to think about what caused him to make that sound, but she had a sneaking suspicion that it was rat skeletons.

"We're probably under the lake." He turned the already lighted tip of his wand toward a darkened tunnel.

Holly glanced to the side as Draco forced Lockhart by her. The boy stepped back, leaving the ponce in front where they could easily keep an eye on him. Holly watched him with disdain, feeling Draco drift back to her other side. She automatically reached out for his right hand, slipping hers into it and squeezing. Luckily, this wasn't a problem since he left was his wand-hand.

The boy turned to gaze at her, his eyes unreadable in the dim lighting. He looked as though he wanted desperately to say something but seemed to think the better of it, and he glanced forward again. The cowering professor took his momentary distraction to move away from the boy and to the other side of Blaise where he hopped to have at least some protection.

Holly looked at Draco for a second before glancing to Blaise, who simply shrugged before shooting Lockhart a scathing look. The girl turned back to the darkness in front of them, filling with apprehension. She knew that just down the tunnel lay the Chamber of Secrets.

De nada, amorcita: You're welcome, little love.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks

Chapter Twenty-Three: Enemies of the Heir

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Twenty-Three: Enemies of the Heir

"Lumos," Holly murmured softly, and the tip of her wand began to glow. She exhaled very slowly before turning to her companions. "Remember any sign of movement and close your eyes right away. I don't know if the Basilisk is actually awake or not, but we better not chance it."

Both Blaise and Draco nodded firmly, while Lockhart gave a squeak of terror at the word "Basilisk."

And with that, the four started down the tunnel, the dandy out in front with Blaise directly behind him. They walked in silence for several moments, the quiet only interrupted by the occasionally whimper from the professor or the crunch of a rat skeleton. During that time, the girl tried her best not to look at where she stepped, desperately hoping that Ginny didn't end up the same way.

They were given a horrible fright several moments later when they rounded a bend, only to discover a long and coiled shape on the ground. Thankfully, it was only a snake skin, not the actual serpent. However, the sheer size of it, at least ten metres long, made Holly go completely white. Beside, her Draco stiffened for a moment, eyeing the skin with a sickened sort of fascination. Blaise was also gaping at it with awe, his face slightly green. The girl heard a muffled thump to the side as the ponce's legs gave out, and he collapsed to the floor.

The caramel-skinned boy came up behind the man, prodding him with his wand. "Come on. Get up." He actually offered the dandy a helping hand.

Holly tore her eyes away from the skin as Draco bent over it, examining the thing closely. She glanced to Blaise and had a flash of forewarning, but it was already too late.

Lockhart did indeed get to his feet, but he launched himself at the boy in the same instant, tackling him to the ground. The dandy straightened, the Slytherin's wand now in his hand. Draco stood and moved to intercept him a second later, but it was more than enough time for Lockhart to summon his wand, despite how hard he desperately tried to hold on.

The girl's wand instantly rose to point at the teacher, but before she could voice a spell, Lockhart once more aimed at Blaise. The tip of his wand only centimetres from the Slytherin boy's left eye. His free hand was gripping Draco tightly as the man had pocketed the younger blond's wand.

Holly faltered. She stared at Lockhart, evaluating the situation.

Now, only the girl and the professor himself were armed, and she dare not make a move as the ponce's wand was pointed far too close to face of her friend for her comfort. She simply watched him, not sure what to do.

They were at an impasse.

The professor smiled sickly. "The adventure ends here, children! I shall take a bit of this skin back up to the school, tell them I was too late to save the girl, and that you three tragically lost your minds at the sight of her mangled body." His grin widened, a manic gleam in his eyes.

In that instant, Holly knew exactly what he was about to do. However, she didn't know how to counter it. The *Protego* shield might not be powerful enough, and it certainly wouldn't protect her friends as far away from her as they were. Desperately, she mentally reached for both of them, telling them exactly what was about to happen.

Lockhart laughed to himself. "Say goodbye to your memories." He glanced at Blaise. "Starting with this one." The ponce flicked his wand, sending it high over his head. "*Obliviate!*"

At that very instant, Draco suddenly pushed into the man, knocking him off-balance. His spell whizzed by Blaise's head, missing by less than a hairsbreadth. The two boys dove to the side, the ponce unexpectedly releasing them when Draco stomped on his foot. They dashed to the side, just as Holly cast a quick shield around them before turning to disarm the dandy. She frantically hoped that she could get both wands away from him.

By that point, the professor had recovered from his shock and was bearing down on them again. Both wands were now in his hands, and

he sneered evilly, looking very much like a more boisterous version of Professor Snape. However, Lockhart didn't go after Blaise and Draco. Instead, he chose the most dangerous of the three students.

"Obliviate!" he shrieked again, casting with the two wands at the same time. He aimed the powerful charm at Holly, who was still recovering from creating the shield around her friends.

There was no way she could cast it again in enough time to protect herself.

Her free hand went up in a defensive gesture as the over-powered spell rushed towards her, burning bright blue. Her thoughts locked on the light baring down on her. However, a surprising thing occurred in the instant before the charm connected. Power flared from her mind as she wished with every fibre of her being that the spell would miss, that it would deflect.

And that is exactly what it did. The spell hit an invisible barrier directly in front of her hand, rebounding back to its caster. There was an explosion of light and sound, and Holly dove toward the serpent skin and out of the way as enormous pieces of the ceiling caved in right where she had been standing.

A moment later, she lifted her head, only to gaze at the solid wall of rock separating her from her friends. The girl clambered to her feet.

"Blaise! Draco!" she called frantically, opening her mind to find them. What she found reassured her.

There was a muffled groan.

"We're fine, Holly!" Blaise's voice called back after a moment.

"We're perfectly fine," Draco added faintly. "Well, maybe not perfectly."

Holly heaved a sigh of relief.

Belatedly, the girl asked, "What about Lockhart?" She ran her hands over the rock wall, searching for a way through.

"No, Lord Peacock over here *Oblivated* himself," Draco stated back to her, and she heard him climbing to his feet. "He can't even remember his own name, much less anything else." His voice was filled with satisfaction.

There was a peculiar thump, which was followed by a painful groan. It suspiciously sounded like the blond had kicked Lockhart in the shins.

The girl smirked before realising that he couldn't see it. "Oh, that's too bad," she replied, laughing to herself. She again ran her hands over the stone.

"The way is completely blocked," Blaise stated, as if reading her mind. "It'll take hours for us to get through."

She sighed as she came to the same conclusion. Indeed, it would take quite some time for them to break through, and Ginny had already been gone for hours.

"Wait there with Lockhart," Holly announced to Blaise and Draco. "I have to go on. If I'm not back in an hour--"

"We're not leaving without you," Draco put in fiercely, his voice full of emotion. "If you're not back in an hour, we'll come to get you. We might be through by then."

The girl smiled despite herself. "I'll see you in a bit then." And she started to back away from the stone wall, lighting her wand with a whispered spell.

"Holly," Blaise called behind her, and she momentarily paused. "Just... just be careful."

However, she didn't reply, merely turning around and heading deeper into the tunnel. Behind her, the girl could hear Blaise and Draco shifting rock. Soon, the sound was gone, but Holly had not yet reached the end of the tunnel.

Minutes passed, and she went around another bend. And then, she saw it.

Right in front of her was a solid wall with two engraved and entwined serpents. Their emerald, stone eyes glittered in her wand light as she approached. Holly trembled at the life-like quality of them as her mind instantly supplied her with an impression of the dangers that undoubtedly lurked behind the wall. She could feel Saladin twisting around her wrist, as though he could feel her nervousness and was trying to comfort her.

Regardless, it didn't seem to be working.

Slowly, she stepped up to the wall, momentarily debating whether she should get out the diary and talk to Tom, ask him what to do. Yet, that urge was gone in an instant, and Holly squared her shoulders.

“Open,” the girl hissed, and the opening melted into existence.

Taking a deep breath, the Slytherin walked inside.

A short while later, Holly ran, ducking into one of the side pipes and fleeing for her very life. She could hear it just behind her, slithering through the area. She dashed through a connecting tunnel, hoping that it would lead her back to Ginny, praying that she would be able to get the two of them out.

When the Slytherin had entered the Chamber, she had expected to find Ginny, weak but hopefully alive. When she had stepped through the entrance, she had expected to meet the redhead's kidnapper. She had expected to have to duel him or her, to have protect Ginny.

What Holly hadn't expected to find was that the kidnapper wasn't even alive... well, not really. She hadn't thought that he would be little more than a necklace, a trinket really, that he had put his soul in. She hadn't thought that he would be out of the amulet when she entered, his ghostly but still solid shape waiting for her arrival. She hadn't expected to be accosted by him, to learn that he truly was an Heir, just not the one they thought it would be.

The green-eyed girl definitely hadn't expected to discover that Ginny, little annoying Ginny, had been possessed by the blasted man the entire year or that she was the one behind the attacks. The Slytherin

hadn't believed that he would be draining the very life-force out of Ginny or that the Petrifications were really failed attempts to steal energy from the students. Holly hadn't thought she would learn that Myrtle was killed, not by Tom or the Basilisk, but by a seventh-year, who had been possessed in the same way the redhead had been.

And Holly certainly hadn't expected that he, the solid-spectre, would now be possessing Slytherin's legendary monster instead.

Even now, Holly was running from the accursed Basilisk, praying to the Maker to save her. Thankfully, Fawkes, whose timely arrival was nothing short of a miracle, had already blinded it. At least, the Slytherin didn't have to worry about its eyes now. Still, there were its metre long fangs and extreme size to contend with.

Curse that blasted Heir of Hufflepuff and his bloody Lifestone, too.

Honestly, just how many disembodied people were running around this school? One would think they were having a bloody convention with the way they kept popping up!

As she sidestepped around another bend, Holly idly wished she had Tom with her, but he wasn't. He was currently laying several metres from Ginny in the exact same spot his diary had landed after falling out of the Slytherin's pocket. Really, it was a stupid thing to desire, his presence, especially since he was little more than a book. He couldn't exactly help her right now, but she still wished he was there with her. He might be able to help her, tell her something useful about the Basilisk... like how to get rid of it.

Holly ducked into a side tunnel, reaching the end of it in seconds. With a slightly uplifted heart, she realised that she had managed to make her way back to the main chamber, having lost the giant serpent some time ago. She darted over to the still unconscious Ginny, almost tripping over both the Sorting Hat, which had been brought by Fawkes, and Tom's diary along the way.

She took out her wand, but Holly hesitated, just as she had when she had first seen the Gryffindor. It wasn't like she knew any spells that would wake the other girl up, just as she didn't know any that would be effective against a twenty metre long snake.

So Holly settled for just shaking the Lion, not knowing what else to do. "Wake up, Ginny," the Slytherin urged desperately.

However, the girl remained completely still. She simply laid there, the yellow Lifestone still clutched in her hands.

Growling to herself, the older girl pried the amulet from the redhead's hands. "Wake up!" She shook the redhead even harder. "Blast it, Ginny! Wake up! I'm handing out signed photos," Holly attempted, not knowing what else to say. "Surely, you want one."

A flare in the back of her mind was her only forewarning, and she dove out of the way of the Basilisk's thrashing tail, the appendage missing the still unconscious Gryffindor by mere centimetres. Thankfully, or perhaps not, the serpent's attention was fixated on the awake student, so it slithered after her instead of remaining behind. Holly again ducked out of the way, managing to send a curse at the snake, but the spell simply ricocheted off of the serpent's scaly hide. She sent another at it, actually hitting it in the face before the magic bounced off. The girl cast three more hexes in rapid succession, but still, they all deflected.

Holly again flung herself to the ground to avoid being trampled. "Help me," she murmured to herself. "Please, somebody help me. Blaise! Draco!"

Little Saladin stirred around her wrist, but she knew he couldn't help her. He would be killed within seconds.

Suddenly, there was a burst of flame mid-air, and Fawkes once more joined in the fray, distracting the flailing beast. Idly, the girl wondered where the phoenix had gone in the first place, but the thought flew out of her mind as she darted to the side to avoid the enraged serpent.

Fawkes dove at the beast, raking his talons across the Basilisk's snout. Angrily, the serpent followed after its feathered menace, moving away from the girl. However, its attention wavered momentarily, and the phoenix again attacked, trying to distract it further. The snake's tail whipped across the floor in a frenzy, almost taking off Holly's head in the process before she ducked.

Unexpectedly, something soft hit her in the face.

It was the Sorting Hat.

Not knowing what else to do, she jammed it onto her head. 'Help me! Please, help me!'

But no one replied.

Inside, she felt the hat constrict strangely, and with another flash of warning, she whipped it off her head. And there was a loud clang as a long shadow fell out of the hat and hit the stone floor.

A slender, silver sword was now lying on the ground at her feet.

'A sword! A bloody sword! What the hell am I supposed to do with this!' her mind screamed, even as she reflexively bent to fetch it.

Strangely, her attention was drawn to the Lifestone, which was still clutched in her hand. She glanced from it to the sword and back.

And Holly knew exactly what she had to do.

If she destroyed the stone, it might weaken the spectre. It might even cause him to lose control of the giant serpent. Further, it might weaken his hold on Ginny or possibly release her completely. Then, the two of them could escape, while Fawkes held the Basilisk off.

Holly filled with resolve, even as she placed the yellow stone on the floor. She experimentally hefted the sword after pocketing her wand. She lifted the weapon above her head and brought the sharp edge slamming down on the direct centre of the Lifestone.

It shattered, and in the background, there was a blood curdling screech.

Holly felt more than saw the giant Basilisk jerk to the side, shrieking for all that it was worth. Nevertheless, it didn't keel over. Instead, it simply flailed for a second before righting itself and heading directly toward her.

It hadn't worked. The spectre-Heir still possessed the Basilisk. She had destroyed its original holding place, but it still had a host. She either had to get it out of the snake... or killed the blasted Heir.

There was a sound to her right, and she sidestepped as the giant serpent once more attacked her. A strange pain shot up her left ankle as her foot slid on a loose stone, but she quickly righted herself.

Fawkes dove at the beast's head again, but it was ignoring the feathered distraction in favour of more savoury prey.

The snake blindly lunged at the Slytherin again, and without even realising what she was doing, Holly raised the sword. She plunged it into the Basilisk's open mouth, feeling a sharp pain in her arm as she did. There was another shriek, and the snake withdrew, dropping to her side. The fang embedded within her arm broke off as the serpent fell, and the beast convulsed with death throes.

There was a brilliant flash, and even as the serpent tumbled to the ground, the spectre-Heir flew out of it. However, he didn't look as he had earlier. Before, he had been almost completely solid, just fuzzy around the edges. Yet, now, he was rapidly becoming blurry and indistinct, colour draining from him until he was mostly a silverish white.

The girl inhaled as she came to a sudden realisation, momentarily ignoring the painful throb in both her arm and her ankle. The spectre was without a host. He was just a free soul without a body or a container. As such, he was dissipating, losing himself. He needed a new host or object to link with in order to survive, and she wasn't going to allow that.

Fawkes dove in front of Ginny just as the spectre turned towards her, preventing the Heir from using that escape route. Meanwhile, the Slytherin pushed the Sorting Hat behind her and held up the sword in her uninjured arm, warding the ghostly man off. Holly stared up at the Lifestone-spectre, determination burning in her eyes as she watched him frantically searching for another host. His gaze darted around, even as his eyes were disappearing from view, his energy and soul dissipating.

The Slytherin knew he was finished. There was simply no where for him to go, and his spectral shape was becoming even murkier as the seconds flew by, but something completely unexpected happened in that moment.

And it would change her life forever.

The ghostly man's gaze landed on the overturned diary, which laid not five metres away from Holly. He smirked then, just as his ethereal face was erasing itself. He dove towards it, reaching the book before either the Slytherin or the phoenix could react, and the ghost-man held it up in his barely-there hand.

Just as he faded entirely, the Heir disappeared into the diary. It floated mid-air for a second, a breeze ruffling its pages. Suddenly, there was another flash of light, this one even more brilliant than the first.

Both Holly and Fawkes were forced to shield their eyes.

A second passed in silence, Holly's head whirling the entire time. The sword suddenly dropped from her numb hand, her fingers refusing to hold it any longer. The girl swayed on the spot. Fawkes was about to fly to her, but something distracted him. There was a whirl of magic through the Chamber, drawing the attention of all those present as the earlier flash of light dimmed.

And mouths of Holly and Fawkes dropped open in surprise.

Tom Riddle, the real and true Tom Riddle, was standing in front of where the Lifestone-spectre had just been, the diary in his hands. His mouth was partially open, and he was staring at his mostly solid body in something akin to awe. He patted his hands along his chest, realising that they didn't pass through as they would if he was a ghost.

The Heir of Hufflepuff was nowhere in sight.

Just as the light dimmed completely, Holly collapsed to the ground, the serpent venom becoming too much for her. Tom overcame his shock and ran over to her, kneeling right in front. She simply gaped at him, too shocked to do much of anything else. Her eyes widened as

she took in the sight of him: his dark hair, his blue-purple eyes, the Slytherin House on his robes, and the very familiar shape of his face.

"I... I know you," Holly whispered haltingly. "I saw you in the mirror of Erised. I dreamed about you," she mumbled as he began to look over her, and her mind suddenly understood something that hadn't made much sense before. "You're the Seer that I'm connected to, aren't you?"

She swayed then, even though she was sitting down. Her vision started to tunnel in, and Tom was forced to steady her as she slowly slid sideways. He leaned forward to get a better look at her, his barely see-through fingers finding the fang and pulling it free with some difficulty. His hands ran over the gaping hole in her arm, and she winced. The girl began to shiver uncontrollably. His hand went to her forehead, and he discovered that she was already feverish.

Tom's fingers went over her wound again with a sinking feeling of dread. Holly had been bitten by a Basilisk, not just bitten but the fang had sunk all the way to the bone. For the sake of the Maker, there was an enormous hole in her!

It was in that moment the teenager knew exactly what was happening. And if he would have been able to, Tom would have wept. Holly was dieing, the Basilisk poison eating its way through her veins. She only had minutes left now.

He frantically reached into her pocket for her wand, actually managing to grasp it in his mostly solid hand, but he faltered. The teenager simply didn't know what to do. He didn't know anything more than basic medical magic, spells to treat simple cuts or scratches. He couldn't cure this.

Salazar's sword, Tom doubted that the Healers at Saint Mungo's could cure this. If he even managed to get her there in enough time.

He sunk to the floor completely, landing next to her. Without even thinking, he pulled her to him, resting her head on his chest. His hands stroked through her dirtied hair absentmindedly, trying to give her at least some comfort in her final moments. Tom squeezed her

tighter as she gave a shuddering breath, her eyes still open and focused on him.

“Holly,” he began but couldn’t find the words for a moment, and precious seconds ticked by. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you earlier. I’m sorry for everything!”

“Tom, it’s fine. You’re forgiven...” she trailed off.

He heard a flutter of wings as Fawkes landed next to Holly.

“lo, Fawkes.” Her eyes drifted shut, even as the bird leaned his head of her wound, pearly tears dripping down on it from his eyes.

The teenager inhaled sudden, understanding alighting his face.

“Phoenix tears...” Tom stared at Holly’s arm as the wound closed completely, and the bird gave a satisfied chirp. “Of course, healing powers... I forgot...” He gazed at Fawkes. “Thank you,” he breathed with absolute amazement.

The phoenix nodded smugly, turning his attention back to the girl. However, he continued to watch the sort-of-transparent wizard.

And in that moment, Fawkes the phoenix witnessed something that would change not only two lives but the wizarding world. Perhaps even the entire world. In that moment, Fawkes knew that as much as he wanted to, he couldn’t yet tell Albus of what he had discovered. He knew that the two still needed time, and he was willing to give it to them. So he simply watched with something bordering on awe as Holly opened her eyes and stared directly at Tom Riddle. She started when she realised where she was, blushing deeply.

“Er... hello,” the girl whispered, sitting up.

The action only served to put her at eye-level with him, and Holly finally got another good look at him, inhaling sharply.

“I do know you,” she stated suddenly, “You really are the one I saw you in the mirror.”

Tom was flabbergasted, her words sinking in. "I... er... that's..." He seemed to be thinking about it. "I'm not sure about that," he finally stated, "but I'm glad that you are all right enough to even think about it now."

"Oh, yes. I'm perfectly fine." She stretched her arm experimentally. "Better than fine, better than I have been for months. I feel wonderful, not even the least bit tired." She turned to look at him, wonder lighting her face as she reached out and touched him. "How is this even possible?" Holly murmured more to herself than to him. "I mean, you were a book! An ensouled one, but still a book!"

The teenager shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think that the spectre expected there to already be something in my diary. He only wanted a place to link himself to temporarily. He just needed something to latch his soul onto before he could go back to defeat you." Tom experimentally, ran his hands over himself once again. "He was so weak by the time that he entered my diary that he was all but gone anyway, and since I was already there, he had nothing to connect with. He just dissipated entirely, and I got all of his energy."

Holly continued to look at Tom for several seconds, shifting in her seat. She flushed with embarrassment when she again realised just where she was sitting.

"Oh, sorry." She hastily hurried to her feet, Tom standing next to her.

"It's fine," he began, but the girl missed what he said as her attention was riveted on the redhead lying nearby.

"Ginny." She rushed over, limping slightly as the healing powers of the tears had been spent entirely on the Basilisk poison. "I completely forgot about Ginny," Holly admonished herself, even though it was understandable that she had. Especially so, when one considered the fact that she had been all but dead a few moments earlier.

The second-year knelt next to the other girl, shaking her once more. "Wake up, Ginny."

Tom moved in next to her. "I don't think that's going to work. Here, let me." He brought forth Holly's wand, attempting to give it to her, and

she shot him a questioning look. "I was trying to heal you," he replied sheepishly. "And now, you can wake her up."

"Oh... thanks for earlier," the girl responded with a faint blush. She turned back to the problem at hand. "Er... I don't know how," she conceded. "You try."

"Do you think that magic will actually work for me?" he asked, fingering her wand.

The girl shrugged. "It certainly worked for the Heir of Hufflepuff, so why not?"

He eyed both her and her wand, shaking his head. "Only one way to find out I suppose." Tom pointed it at Ginny. "*Ennervate*."

A light shot out of the tip, colliding with the redhead. The other two waited with baited breath, not that Tom actually needed to breathe. Nevertheless, a minute passed, and the Gryffindor didn't stir.

Both Tom and Holly looked stumped.

"Maybe wasn't just the spectre keeping her asleep? We probably need to get her to the Hospital Wing just the same," the second-year supplied after a moment, gently prodding Ginny. "She's almost completely immobile, Petrified even, just like the others. I don't think she can actually wake up yet." The girl turned to her companion. "Can you levitate her or something?"

The teenager considered. "I guess that I could," he said slowly.

However, Fawkes had other ideas. The phoenix fluttered down in front of them, brandishing his tail feathers. The Sorting Hat was clutched in his talons, frowning slightly, but he smiled when he noticed that Tom was looking.

"Bugger, I forgot," Holly put in after a second, shaking her head. "Fawkes can carry us out easily and get Blaise and Draco along the way."

Tom's eyes widened. "I forgot, too." He hesitated, seeming to be thinking about something. "Er... Holly, what exactly are we going to say about me? I'm Voldemort..." A strange expression passed over his face. "Well, sort of. Anyway, I'm not sure how well Professor Dumbledore – or anyone else for that matter – would handle it."

That was certainly true. Most likely, anyone who discovered that Tom was alive and well would panic, cursing first and asking questions later. It was too dangerous for him to come back with her. He could be arrested on the spot or even destroyed. Perhaps he should just stay down here for the time being. When questioned, she would just deny his involvement, pretend that she knew nothing about it.

"Er... I just won't say anything about you at all," Holly supplied very slowly, thinking it over. "Blaise, Draco, Luna, and I – we will just pretend we have no idea about you. We'll say that we deduced the location of the Chamber from what Myrtle said, and then... blast!" She growled suddenly as something occurred to her.

Tom gave her a confused glance.

"I'll have to explain about the Parseltongue," the girl belatedly explained. "But I suppose I can tell Dumbledore that in private. I think that I can trust him with it. He wouldn't say anything to anyone."

Fawkes cooed his agreement.

Tom soaked in her words. "But what about the fact that I'm..." He seemed at a loss for words to describe his situation. "The way I am now," he finally decided. "I will certainly be very hard to hide."

The girl froze. "I don't know," she replied after a moment. "I..."

Her gaze drifted to the diary, which she hadn't even been aware he was still holding. Holly absentmindedly took it from his hands.

"Well, the Heir could freely move in and out of the Lifestone, so maybe you can do that with your diary."

The wizard nodded. Yet, unexpectedly, he hesitated, his eyes very wide.

“What about Fawkes and the Sorting Hat? They know about me, too,” the dark-haired teenager said with a weak voice.

Holly blinked, turning to look at the phoenix, completely unsure what to say. However, there was something peculiar in the bird’s demeanour as she looked into his green and gold eyes. She wasn’t sure why, but somehow, the girl abruptly understood that they wouldn’t have a problem on that front.

“I don’t think we’ll have to worry about it, but it doesn’t really matter at all if you can’t go back into the diary,” the Slytherin girl concluded, handing the book back.

Tom said, “Okay... in a minute. Just to be clear, you won’t say anything about me?” It was a question and not a statement.

“No.” Then, a smile twitched at the tips of her lips. “I’ll blame it all on Blaise, Draco, and me. You won’t even be mentioned.”

The teenager inclined his head and gave her a very soft smile, the first she had ever seen from him. It was a nice change from the normal mask or smirk he seemed to favour, and it softened his features.

For a second, he truly looked like he was a normal sixteen-year-old. And not the least like the man who would one day murder her parents and countless others.

“Thank you, Holly... for everything,” Tom said quietly, opening the diary.

He closed his eyes, just missing her return grin. An expression of pure concentration clouded his face. A second later, and he disappeared within the pages of the diary.

Luckily, the girl caught the book before it could hit the floor.

“Are you all right?” she asked, nervously waiting for a reply. Belatedly, Holly realised that he might not have enough ink stored in the pages to respond, but her fear was proven groundless.

Yes. Perfectly fine. Though, it's really peculiar now. I can actually see what you are doing when the diary is open, not just hear you like before.

"Really? That is odd," Holly answered with a raise of her eyebrow. "I'm going to go now. Ginny really does need to get out of here."

Fine. I'll talk to you later.

With that, the girl deposited the diary into her pocket and rose to her feet, favouring her left ankle. Holly gently took hold of both Ginny's hand and Fawkes' tail feathers. The phoenix winked at her, while the Sorting Hat offered a smile and a slight nod.

The girl simply exhaled. "Anytime you're ready, Fawkes."

"So let me get this straight," Theo stated a few days later on the train ride home, looking highly exasperated.

The entire group of second-year Slytherins plus Luna and Gavin were gathered in a compartment that Tom had nicely expanded for them before quickly returning to the safety of his diary.

"Not only is your diary ensouled," the brunet boy went on, "but he happens to be the counterpart of Lord Voldemort, who used to really be the same bloke. Not only that, but he's the same Seer that allowed you to have visions." He ticked off his fingers, as if counting. "Further, since he absorbed the power in the Lifestone, he is almost completely alive now and can actually leave the diary's pages and walked around as long as it's close by. And when he's in it, Tom can see and hear what's going on around him, even if it's closed."

"Also," Gavin inserted himself, looking away from the window. "You discovered that the house-elf that has been 'helping' you was actually bonded to the Malfoys and that he had some demented notion that they were trying to hurt you."

Draco growled at the implication. "Yes, Dobby did think my parents were the cause, but we found out that they weren't. Their former associates--"

“Death Eaters, he means,” Pansy clarified for everyone.

The blond shot her a look, but it was Holly who responded.

“Yes, the Death Eaters were really behind it, and the house-elf had overheard them giving Lucius a very vague warning. The house-elf misunderstood and thought that they were going to attack me, not the school.” Her gaze drifted around the compartment. “However, Lucius had to wait until the way was clear before he could warn us, which is why he waited until after Yule.”

The others had looks of pure bewilderment on their faces, not that anyone could really blame them. It was a rather convoluted explanation, which is why it had taken several days for them to completely understand. Even now, they were still confused.

Vincent and Greg were sitting with their mouths slightly open, just staring at their friends. In the mean time, Daphne and Cynthia kept exchanging puzzled looks, while Theo shook with silent laughter. Pansy absentmindedly chewed on her nails, a nervous habit that she despised and thought herself rid of. Autumn dazedly gaped at everyone, still focused on Lockhart’s role in the entire mess. Gavin and Milli had very odd smiles on their faces, and Luna didn’t seem to be paying the least bit attention, simply gazing out the window and singing to herself.

“That is really bizarre, Hols,” Milli put in after a moment, shaking her head. “Is there anything else to add to that?”

Holly nodded absentmindedly, thinking over her return from the Chamber of Secrets.

After she had taken hold of Fawkes, the phoenix had flown both her and Ginny first to Holly’s friends and Lockhart before taking all of them directly to the McGonagall’s office. There, the Slytherins had been rather shocked to see not only the Transfiguration professor but also Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Dumbledore himself. After the Weasleys and McGonagall had left to take both Ginny and the still befuddled Lockhart to the Hospital Wing, the three Slytherins had launched into their explanation, carefully leaving out all mention of Tom. Holly had teetered on the edge of revealing that she was

Parselmouth, but she had been forced to tell in order to explain how they had got into the Chamber. Dumbledore's eyes had widened momentarily, a flash of something crossing them in an instant, but he had believed her completely when the girl had sworn that she hadn't used her ability to harm or attack anyone.

The headmaster's eyes had again momentarily widened, this time to the size of Galleons, when she had proceeded to the part about the Heir of Hufflepuff and the Lifestone, and the man had actually blinked rather stupidly in shock for several seconds before recovering. From there, the explanation had been rather straight forward, only stumbling when Holly had presented the sword she had used to destroy both the amulet and the Basilisk.

At that point, it had been the three Slytherins turn to be surprised as the professor had carefully examined it, actually laughing at loud. He had proudly turned the sword over in his hands, showing them the name written on it: *Godric Gryffindor*.

"Actually, I think we have pretty much covered everything," Holly conceded after she had turned the entire incident over in her mind. "Though we did learn why Professor Dumbledore was so surprised about the Lifestone. Apparently, he thought that this was all a plot by Voldemort," Holly stated, pausing as her friends flinched. "And that the attacks fifty years ago had been as well."

Draco inserted himself, "You haven't told them the best part yet." He rubbed his hands together in glee and smiled wickedly. "You have to tell them about the Heir."

Holly exhaled slowly. "You see, the Lifestone contained the Heir of Hufflepuff, and the last known one was none other than Lord Grindelwald himself."

Everyone was flabbergasted, echoing the same expression that had been on Dumbledore's face.

"It wasn't--" Pansy began, her face completely white.

"No," Holly hurriedly assured them. "But it was one of his ancestors, just some bloke from a few hundred years ago that wanted to gain

power. However, Professor Dumbledore does suspect that Ginny may have received the Lifestone from a Death Eater, who probably got it from the Dark Lord, in turn.”

Luna smiled dreamily to herself, and her voice cut into the conversation. “Well, had Ginny been friendly to me this year, we probably would have been able to free her earlier. It’s too bad that she decided not to be friends anymore, even after all the time we spent with each other when we were little.” She blinked owlshly and twirled her broomstick earrings. “Though, that might have been because I told her that I used to fancy Ronald.”

“Er... did I just hear you right?” Theo started with a giggle, but the blonde interrupted.

“And what happened to the house-elf,” Luna went on, ignoring everyone’s shocked expressions. “Dobby, did you say? He did risk a great deal to warn you.”

The three Slytherins from the Chamber exchanged a glance. Holly sighed. Draco snorted and rolled his eyes. Blaise laughed.

“Hols here accidentally freed him,” the caramel-skinned boy put in between chuckles.

Everyone’s gaze drifted to her, and Holly sighed again.

“Well, I sprained my ankle in the Chamber, while I was dodging the Basilisk, and it wasn’t until after we had explained everything that I even realised it. I had taken my shoe and sock off for Professor Dumbledore and Fawkes to look at, but then, Lucius showed up, interrupting everything. Dobby was with him.” She hesitated, and Blaise nudged her to get her to continue.

“Well, my sock was on the desk, and Dobby came over, while everyone else was distracted,” Holly carried on, finding the window suddenly very interesting. “He was probably trying to warn me again.” Her best friend shot her a look, which she ignored. “Anyway, Draco came over to help me, and somehow, between the three of us – Fawkes, Draco, and me – we managed to knock my sock off. Well,

Dobby caught it.” She exhaled slowly. “In effect, we gave him clothes, so we basically freed him by accident.”

Everyone blinked. Theo let out a snort of laughter, Gavin and Milli soon joining him.

“Oh,” Pansy commented after a heartbeat. “Will your father be mad, Draco?”

The blond gave a sheepish smile. “Actually, he looked somewhat relieved. After he got over his shock... well, I actually think he found it rather funny.” He shrugged. “We have plenty of other house-elves, so I don’t think it will really matter in the long run.”

There was a moment of silence before Theo spoke again, conquering his mirth. “What did you do with him, then?”

“We just let him go,” Draco replied. “Well, after he promised Holly not to try to save her life again.”

They all snickered.

“So,” Milli asked with slight confusion, still trying to clarify something, “you didn’t tell anyone about the diary? No one at all? You just said that you followed Hagrid’s clue, deduced it was Myrtle, and then questioned her. From there, you figured out it where the Chamber was.” She gifted them with a more than slightly impressed look.

“Correct,” Blaise answered for Holly. “Well, Fawkes and the Sorting Hat know, but they won’t be telling anyone.”

Everyone just goggled at him, clearly wondering how they had managed that.

“Wait,” Autumn interrupted, finally coming out of her Lockhart induced stupor. “Earlier, I thought you said that you were actually lectured by Professor Snape for ‘being so foolhardy as to actually go to the Chamber yourselves’, not that I can blame him,” she allowed. “Did that really happen?”

Blaise, Draco, and Holly made faces at the remembrance of their Head of House's hour long lecture – read tirade – which had involved a mixture of sarcasm, anger, and yelling on his part and a great deal of staring at the floor on theirs. The one the two boys had received the year previous had been bad enough, though Holly had managed to miss out on it due to the fact that she had been taken against her will. However, the most recent lecture certainly beat his original hands down.

There were only two positive things they were willing to say about Professor Snape's sermon. One, their Head hadn't taken any points, actually looking at them with pride for a moment and awarding fifty points on top of the three hundred they had won from Headmaster Dumbledore. Though, Professor Snape had immediately taken ten each for sheer stupidity. Two, the Potions master had informed Holly that he didn't see her as a clone of her father, even though their Head of House had sarcastically commented that with her foolish behaviour it was becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate between them.

"Also, we figured out how Lockhart got all the information for things in his books," Blaise stated smugly.

Pansy shot him an intrigued glance, while Autumn seemed completely put out.

"Remember how we told you about the Memory charm he tried to use on us." At their nods, Blaise went on, "Well, he's apparently very good at those."

"They're the only thing he's good at," Theo stated in an undertone, receiving a snicker from both Gavin and Milli for his efforts.

"Just about." Draco smirked. "Anyway," the blond went on, "the ponce has been casting them on people and simply taking credit for the things they did."

Autumn's eyes were very wide, and she looked like she might actually cry in disappointment.

“This is simply too much to process at one time.” Theo unexpectedly groaned, putting his face in his hands. “I think my head is going to explode.”

Milli looked slightly green. “Mine, too.”

“And mine,” Gavin chimed in.

“Us, too,” Vincent said, pointing at both he and Greg.

“As if you have anything in them to begin with,” Pansy commented in a false undertone.

Everyone laughed, even Autumn.

After a moment, the chubby girl spoke again. “So is there anything else?” Milli asked rhetorically. “Any other revelations to dazzle us with.”

Holly laughed nervously, glancing at Blaise, then Draco, and finally Luna. The first gave her an encouraging smile and a nod. The green-eyed girl knew it was time to tell her friends one last secret.

“Well, I’m a Mind Mage,” Holly stated nonchalantly. “A telepath to be more exact.”

“Oh, me, too,” Luna inserted with a dazed smile, humming to herself. She twirled her earrings once more.

Gavin goggled at them. “How did you happen to discover this?”

The two girls exchanged a glance before Holly briefly explained. She touched upon the fact that she had known since before Hogwarts and that she had been too afraid to say anything before. After she was finished, the girl received several minutes of encouragement from her friends and pledges of secrecy.

Without warning, Theo moaned, “Now, I know my head will explode.”

Everyone burst out in laughter.

After, they calmed somewhat, the conversation soon drifted back to the Chamber, the Basilisk, and other odds and ends.

A few moments later, the train pulled into the station. Holly hugged each of her friends, receiving hearty squeezes from Milli and Theo. She walked with Luna over to meet the other girl's father, exchanging pleasantries with the odd man for several moments before being drug over to Draco's parents and doing the same.

It was somewhat awkward speaking to Lucius Malfoy, especially with what Holly knew of him now, but she figured that she managed it well enough. She started to apologise about Dobby, but the aristocrat brushed her off, informing her that it wasn't her fault and that he would have been given clothes based on his actions alone.

Afterwards, the two remaining Slytherins greeted Blaise's parents and chatted for a time, but they were interrupted when three others joined them.

Hermione, Neville, and Ron rushed up to her before Holly could move away, trapping her between them. The Slytherin had been actively avoiding them since her return from the Chamber and Professor Dumbledore's subsequent declaration that she had caught the culprit. But now, it seemed like she couldn't get away from them.

The three Gryffindors greeted her, immediately praising her for her bravery. Hermione asserted that she was exceptionally proud of Holly, especially for figuring out the mystery. Ron beamed and clapped her forcefully on the back, thanking her for saving his sister. Neville simply congratulated her, guiltily looking at the ground.

That was all well and good, except none of them apologised for doubting her or for believing the rumours. Ron even stated that he had known her innocent all along, the bushy-haired girl quickly agreeing. Neville just flushed bright red, looking at his Housemates with an unreadable expression and asking her if her relatives would be proud.

"Are you insane?" Holly asked simply. "All those times I could have died, and I didn't manage it. They'll be furious."

Blaise was the only one who didn't laugh; he knew it wasn't a joke.

Instead, he simply waited until the Gryffindors drifted away to their own families and wrapped his arms tightly around her, hugging her for all he was worth. Eren and Dante looked on proudly.

"Be good, Hols," Blaise murmured in her ear. "I plan to write at least twice a week... just in case. Keep the diary with you at all times, and if they – the Dursleys do anything – let me know."

There was a very peculiar gleam in his eyes, and Holly wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

"I will," she promised, patting her pocket and the diary inside it. "I'll send you a letter tomorrow."

Blaise nodded and pressed a kiss to her cheek. He pulled back, hooking her arm within his. "Mum, I'll be back in a minute. I just want to walk Holly over."

Eren smiled faintly, exchanging a look with her husband, but didn't say anything as her son escorted his friend to her caretakers.

Vernon fumed as the students came up to him and turned away without saying a word. However, Holly truly didn't care. It didn't matter to her at all. He didn't matter to her at all. The only people who did were the ones she had already said goodbye to.

"I'll see you soon," she said softly to Blaise, give his hand a squeeze before stepping away.

He smiled, but it faded as she turned and followed in Dursley's wake. His thoughts were already burning with how to release her from her own personal summer prison. The boy continued watching her long after she had disappeared into the crowd.

Deep inside, Blaise wondered if, and when, he would have to rescue her from her family.

Finite Incantatem

AN: In case anyone is wondering, the Heir of Hufflepuff used a Recording spell to enter the Chamber. Myrtle made a reference to it in the previous chapter. Also, I know the plot was quite convoluted, so if you have any questions, just message me. I'll try to explain as best I can. Further, later on, I might come back and try to rework it some so that it makes more sense.

Finally, it has come to my attention that I misnamed one of Blaise's sisters. She is Alexandria, not Alexia... like I had written in a number of places. Alexia was actually a Slytherin Prefect.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks

Chapter Twenty-Four: Child of Hope

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Twenty-Four: Child of Hope

Tom Marvolo Riddle was a rather unusual young man. For one, he was both sixteen and over sixty years old. For another, he was a wizard, but at the same time, he was also little more than a memory in a diary. Third, there was another version of him out in the world, doing Maker only knows what sort of horrible things. Finally, Tom Riddle wasn't technically alive, either copy of him, though he wasn't entirely sure about the last part.

All in all, he was a conundrum, a mystery wrapped in an enigma, a puzzle to befuddle all takers, a riddle to confuse the very wisest. Tom simply was, and that was good enough for Holly.

Yet, the puzzling aspects of his inherent nature aside, he was still like any other person, complete with emotions and thoughts and desires. As such, it was rather understandable that he found himself in his current situation: worry starting to creep into his mind, wondering when Holly would finally return.

Even now, he sat quietly on her bed, twirling her wand with the one hand, while the other stroked the little serpent coiled around his wrist. Despite the open book in his lap, Tom paid no mind to it. In fact, he wasn't even looking at the Charms text at all. Instead, his dark eyes drifted around the room, momentarily landing on the framed photo of Lily and James Potter.

The two beamed at him when they noticed his attention, James patting his wife's very pregnant belly and grinning smugly. Tom snorted and allowed his gaze to wander again, drifting to the enormous pile of letters on Holly's desk.

Though the sheer amount was mind-boggling, it made sense that she would have so many, especially since her three closest friends were writing daily. Not only that but Milli, Theo, and Gavin were writing at least twice a week, and there were still the assorted ones from Remus and the other Slytherins. Then, there was her annual letter from Hogwarts, complete with permission form for Hogsmeade. And in spite of the ready explanation, Tom was still somewhat baffled by the sheer amount of correspondence Holly received.

She had even gotten a few letters from the Gryffindors, including presents as they wouldn't be attending her party when they returned to school, not that they even knew she was having one. In truth, Holly seemed rather reluctant to answer those three, not that Tom could blame her.

Only Neville had had the presence of mind to apologise for his actions the previous school year, which was probably why he was the only one Holly had bothered to contact. Still, she had penned vague and rather short thank you notes to all of them. It was only as she was getting ready to send them that she had remembered Ron was in Egypt, his family having won the *Dailey Prophet's* annual Grand Prize Galleon Draw, and Hermione was vacationing in France.

Regardless, Holly hadn't looked very happy to be writing to them in the first place.

Come to think of it, despite her birthday, Holly was in a gloomy mood altogether. Truthfully, the third-year had been acting rather strange since their return from Hogwarts. She had been easily distracted and listless.

Originally, Tom had thought that it would go away in a few days, but it only seemed to increase as time went on. And as of late, she had increasingly suffered from migraines and terrible insomnia. It wasn't unusual for her to stay up the majority of the night, mostly passing the time by talking with Tom himself, only to fall into a restless slumber mere hours before dawn. Then, she was like a zombie most of her waking hours, but that was probably because she had so many chores to do.

Tom simply couldn't understand why she was like this, though he had several theories, and he was on the brink of force feeding her the Sleeping draught he had brewed in secret. Perhaps it was all due to her separation from her other friends, something that letters couldn't really make up for. In fact, she seemed to be taking Blaise's momentary loss particularly hard. She actually missed him the most out of all, not that Tom could blame her as the other boy was her closest companion.

On the other hand, maybe it was simply nerves. The Dursleys had been incredibly annoying lately with Petunia screeching at all hours, Vernon constantly bellowing, and Dudley just being his usual piggy self. Not to mention the fact that she didn't even have many of her school things to distract her since her trunk was locked in the cupboard under the stairs. She had only a few book and her potion supplies, which she had taken when her relatives were distracted by Vernon's new company car one day.

Or perhaps her behaviour was due to the crazed convict that had been on the loose for several weeks now. Though Holly hadn't said anything about him, Tom had caught her staring at his picture in their filched paper, a confused expression on her face. She had gazed at the photo for several hours, almost like she were trying to remember something.

Come to think of it, Tom himself found the man vaguely familiar, as if he had seen his picture before and just couldn't remember where.

But that was beside the point. The real problem was Holly herself, and no matter how many theories Tom came up with, none of them really seemed to provide an adequate explanation for Holly's odd behaviour.

An unexpected noise caught Tom's attention just then, and his eyes riveted on the closed bedroom door. He tensed and listened, poised to move. However, any noises he might have heard were apparently only due to his imagination, and several moments passed without further incident. Still, the teenager continued to stare at the door, though this time it was because he was lost in concentration.

For all his returned Seer gifts, they didn't truly seem to be helping him now because he still couldn't figure out how Holly was at the moment or when she would finally return. But at least, he could use them once again, a thing he hadn't been able to do when he had been completely trapped in the diary. Nonetheless, he had much less control over his abilities now than he had before his five decade hibernation.

A grimace crossed Tom's face at the thought of his Mind Magic skills or lack there of. This, in turn, disrupted his concentration and caused

him to lose the faint impression of Holly he had actually managed to obtain. She was alive and in reasonable condition, but that was all he could really ascertain at the moment.

Growling to himself for his lack of training, Tom cursed and vowed to himself to work on his abilities harder. He would need to if he ever wanted to use them again for anything more than brief glimpses. The only positive benefit at the moment was the fact that they connected him to the younger girl, and in turn, they were both tied to his other version, something that had earlier allowed her to know of the true threat against the Philosopher's Stone.

Another unexpected sound just outside the room dragged Tom abruptly from his reverie. He shifted where he sat, moving the book from his lap. One hand reached for his opened diary, which was on the bedside table, just in case that wasn't Holly coming down the hallway. He didn't fancy the horse-face, the giant buffoon, or the miniature whale finally discovering his presence.

Almost an entire month had passed with him living in Holly's room, and they had yet to figure out there was another person around, a fact that amused him greatly. Of course, they rarely entered her room, probably afraid that they would be contaminated or some other such nonsense, but he would've thought the whispered voices in the dead of night to be a major give away.

Still, the Dursleys and their astounding stupidity aside, it wouldn't do to be caught now.

The teenager readied himself to disappear at a moment's notice. He didn't really like to spend more time than absolutely necessary in the thing. Otherwise, he would already be inside. Shaking his head at the prospect, Tom sighed heavily and fingered his diary, mind drifting back to the Dursleys.

He couldn't quite fathom how his friend could be related to such utter fools, though her connection to Vernon was by marriage only. Perhaps her mother had been adopted after all, just as he suspected more and more with each passing day. It was certain that the horse-face looked nothing at all like the pictures of Holly's mother he had seen in her album and in the framed photo Blaise had given to her.

Lily Potter had been vivacious, lovely with a wicked smile and mischievous gleam in her eyes. According to what he had learned from Holly, she had been highly intelligent, a genius at Charms even. She had been loyal and loving, willing to die for her only child.

Petunia, on the other hand, was shudder-worthy. And that was the most positive thing Tom could say of her. She was nosy and gossipy, horrid to her own niece. Yet, for all her quick eyes and memory for the goings-on of the neighbours, she was too idiotic to notice the happenings in her own home.

Either the two weren't really related, or Fate was playing a rather cruel trick.

Still, perhaps blood did tie them together as the wards on Number Four would suggest. But then, that didn't make them family, only people who shared a common ancestry. Family was more than blood. His own Muggle father was proof enough of that.

A faint tap on the door snapped Tom to attention, but he eased when he heard another one. The Dursleys wouldn't knock before barging in, never willing to give Holly the courtesy. Nevertheless, it made an excellent signal for the two Slytherins, allowing him to know that she was alone.

The door opened without a sound, and a dark-haired girl whipped inside before closing it behind her with a silent snap. Her vivid green eyes instantly flickered to Tom, who was in the process of rising, but he paused, taking in the sight of her sagging shoulders and the tiredness to her face. He noticed her glazed eyes flinch and turn away from the light in the room. Undoubtedly, she had yet another headache.

"Hello," Tom said, standing awkward beside her bed.

She didn't respond, merely nodding to him in greeting and attempting to smile, but it fell flat.

Belatedly, he noted the lingering dirt underneath her recently washed fingernails, the appendages bright red from where she had scrubbed. The ends of her long sleeves were still wet. He guessed that she had

probably worked the garden most of the day, but as he saw her sway on her feet, he had a sneaking suspicion that she had done other chores as well.

His gaze drifted to the window and to the ever increasing darkness outside. Holly had left just after sunrise, and this was the first she had returned. Tom was willing to bet all the gold he didn't have in Gringotts that she had worked the day through without a single break.

Curse those blasted Dursleys.

He felt a swell of sympathy, recalling his own time at the orphanage and the chores he had been forced to do there. But Tom quickly shook away the memories before they had a chance to take a darker turn.

"Here, rest a bit," he said, motioning to her bed and stepping to the side as she sat down. "Would you like something to eat?" he questioned, receiving a faint nod in return. Tom gave a grim grin before ducking underneath her bed and pulling out a box from beneath the floorboards. He paused for a moment, studying the contents.

"Hm... your choices are an apple, an apple, and – guess what – an apple," he put in with a mocking tone. "I believe this means we'll have to raid the Dursleys' food stores again." He handed the lone piece of fruit to Holly without prompting. "Or maybe you could write to our friends, ask for...**assistance**," he stated, changing his word choice at her raised eyebrows.

"No, not that it really matters," she replied as she finished chewing. "We'll be leaving soon anyway. It's just another week before we're supposed to stay with Blaise. Just one more week, and we'll be gone. It should be easy enough--"

Unexpectedly, a snarl crossed her face. She put down her food with a hint of disgust.

"Holly?" Tom questioned, eyes narrowing dangerously. "What is it?"

She all but growled, "I forgot. How could I forget?" the girl mumbled more to herself than to him, but at his puzzled expression, she explained, "Marge is coming tomorrow... well, she was actually supposed to be here today, but her train was delayed."

Tom tilted his head to the side, trying to catch up. "Who?"

"Marge... Vernon's idiot sister," she responded with a sneer.

"And I take it that she is every bit as bad as her brother," the older Slytherin stated, wrapping up the remains of her half-eaten meal and putting it back in the box.

Holly exhaled slowly. "She's positively awful, enjoys setting her bulldogs on me. She let one chase me up a tree once and left me there all day. Then, she likes to whack me on the shins when she feels I'm out of line. Not only that, but she insists on buying Dudley expensive gifts in front of me, daring me to say something." The girl sniffed disdainfully. "I could go on."

"No need," Tom rapidly interrupted, not at all liking the things he had heard so far. He could only imagine what else the woman had done. He turned back to his friend about to say as much, but he noticed her attention was elsewhere.

She was looking around, her gaze going to the cards her Slytherin friends had sent her in lieu of gifts. Her eyes then flickered to the book Hagrid had provided, which even now had one of Dudley's belts wrapped around it to keep it from snapping at her. They drifted to the Pocket Sneakoscope, the broom servicing kit, and the Defence book that Ron, Hermione, and Neville had gifted her respectively. Finally, she glanced at her present from Remus, a pencil sketch with the clouds drifting in front of the full moon and the trees swaying in an invisible breeze, and the small selection of other, obviously magical objects that were lying about.

The girl breathed out very slowly. "With her here, I have to put all of my things away." Holly rose, shuffling over to her desk. "Marge would have an aneurism if she saw any of this." Truthfully, Holly didn't seem all that bothered by the prospect, but the thought of what Vernon

would do to her if anything happened to his sister was motivation enough.

She quietly picked up her framed picture of her parents, gazing at it longingly before she started to pack it and the rest of her possessions under the floorboards. She then petted Hedwig before giving the owl firm instructions to go stay with Blaise, receiving an unhappy nip to her fingers in return. Holly simply sighed, and Tom gave her an unreadable look before rising to help.

The entire time they were working, he didn't say anything, giving no condolences as he knew that she won't want them. Afterwards, however, he did tentatively put his hand on her arm, silently lending his support. But something unexpected happened when he did so.

Holly winced, face tightening in pain as she bit her lip to keep from making a sound.

Tom looked at her speculatively, moving his hand more firmly on her arm. She winced again and tried to jerk away, but he tightly held on. He gently eased her sleeve up, revealing the darkening bruise on her forearm, scratch marks visible along the edges. It was shaped like a hand, as if someone had grabbed onto her, and was accompanied by several scratches that looked like fingernail marks.

"Holly?" he asked, a very hard tone to his voice. He gazed down at her, something a lot like rage passing through his dark eyes. "Was it Vernon?" Tom all but snarled, though his voice was strangely calm, soft and conversational. He had a dangerous cast to his face, shadowed and deadly.

Holly was very much reminded of his connection to Lord Voldemort in that moment. She sighed, losing all energy to fight.

"No."

Holly pulled away, and he reluctantly released her, eyes now blazing with power. The girl inhaled through her mouth, attempting to calm the anger that was burning and twisting in her own belly.

"The whale then," Tom concluded, a venomous grin tugging at his lips. "Horse's hands aren't that large." The teenager studied the bruise again, oscillating between mentally calculating if there were enough potion ingredients left to make a poultice and wondering just what kind of nasty and untraceable poison he should brew.

"What happened?" he inquired several moments later after mostly reining in himself, though his face was still calculating.

The girl shuddered in recollection. "Let's just say that Ron isn't the only one who fancies me." Holly breathed out, blowing a strand of hair from her face. "According to what his piggy mind was screaming as he tried to grope me, Dudley doesn't care that I'm a worthless freak. In fact, he feels that I might actually have one use." She spat the last part, shaking with barely suppressed rage.

Tom's eyes narrowed into serpentine slits. "I'm going to hex his hands off," he stated in an utterly collected tone, his words more promise than threat. Inside, he was warring with the urge to go through with his dark desires then and there.

"How completely foul and disgusting," he hissed. "I can't believe that oaf tried to force you. Well, perhaps I can," Tom conceded idly, "especially since he knows that no woman would ever have him."

"I only managed to get away because of my Mind Magic. I had to mentally throw him off me," the third-year added, her tiny hands balling into fists.

Thanks to her mental abilities, Holly had been aware of Dudley's preoccupation with her over the last month, though she had carefully avoided mentioning it to Tom. Apparently, Dudley had matured in one area during the past year, and as such, he was now aware of females as something more than punching bags. However, it seemed that no girl wanted anything to do with him, not that Holly could really blame them. So Dudley's attention had turned to the only one who would have little choice in the matter: his cousin.

At that thought, her mind tumbled into the incident that had occurred just that morning.

She had been working in the garden, pulling up the weeds like Petunia had ordered, when Dudley had arrived. Her telepathy had thankfully warned her of his presence, so she had already been alert when he entered the backyard from the kitchen. It was only the selfsame gift that had driven her to her feet when he had shuffled up to her, her mind already well aware of what he intended. Yet, cornered as she was between the house and the fence, Holly had been unable to dart away from him before he grabbed her arm. Regardless, her mental defences and accidental magic had risen to the occasion, all but throwing him from her, but his jagged and bitten fingernails had regrettably caught her skin as he had been forced away.

Still, Dudley had been afraid afterwards, scared she would further retaliate. So he had waddled off.

Nevertheless, the Slytherin wouldn't put it passed him to try again.

"That's it; you're taking your wand with you from now on no matter what," Tom put in fiercely, dispelling her memory. "We definitely removed the Monitoring charms on it, so you can use it if need be." Another malevolent smile tugged at his lips, as though he was already envisioning the curses she would cast.

Holly made a face, remembering the complicated potion they had brewed in secret that had removed the spells. "Yes, I know, but we went over this before, Tom. Dobby managed to set off the under-age detections, so the Ministry or Dumbledore undeniably have extra wards on the house. They'll still know if I cast anything."

"Not if you do it away from the property," he said with a smirk, clearly liking that idea. "We didn't receive a warning when I hexed the blasted dog that was bothering you when we went to grocers last week."

"But I still don't want to chance it too much. I can't get expelled, Tom," the girl murmured in a very small voice. "You know that. I can't be sent back. I can't have to remain here until I'm of age."

"I know," he responded, anger abating momentarily. "But you don't deserve this, Holly, and if you don't do something about it, it will only get worse. Trust me, I know." He bit his lip, refusing to say more.

"And I know that, but there isn't much I can do." She gestured emphatically. "I have to stay here, at least temporarily, so that the blood protections are still active. I can't curse them. They'd never take me back if I did."

Tom stared at her for a second before finally nodding. "We still need to do something... but it'll have to be a potion then," he concluded. "Something that they can't detect and that is easily deniable."

Holly inclined her head in acquiescence. "That's doable. I have leftover ingredients from school and when we made the potion to get rid of the Monitoring charms. It'll be simple enough to owl-order anything extra we need." She paused to think. "Which one do you think we should use?"

"Hm... perhaps a Calming draught," the teenager replied, thinking it over. "Maybe a Befuddlement potion – that worked wonders on the children at the orphanage before I could use my wand against them. You'll even learn to make it this year, I believe." He rubbed his chin, beginning to pace around her room as he contemplated.

"I think I can still remember how to do that one," Tom went on after a moment, "but did it have Flobberworm pus or Essence of Niffler? I can't recall which, but I do know that one will cause him to shrink down and turn purple," he finished, sounding completely serious. His smirk suggested that he might add the wrong ingredient just to spite the Dursleys.

Holly couldn't help herself, the strain of her day too much for her. She chuckled, though there was a faintly hysterical ring to it.

"I could always just set Saladin on them," she added after she had calmed down, and the little serpent glanced up from his spot on the bed. "Even for his size, he is scary enough to do what's needed. Dudley is especially afraid of snakes since I set a few garden ones on him when I was seven."

“Only as a last resort,” Tom cut in with a solemn voice, but his gleaming eyes gave him away. “We don’t want it getting out that you are a Parselmouth, after all.”

Holly shrugged. “I might as well kiss my arse goodbye if that happens, but I’ll still keep Saladin with me, nonetheless.” The little snake flicked his tongue, slithering over to snuggle in her hand. “I can just say he’s my pet. That alone will be enough to scare Dudley away.”

Tom grinned darkly but didn’t say anything for several minutes. Instead, he reached over to pet the snake, too. In the meantime, he silently observed Holly, watching her shoulders sag further. He noted her eyes drift half-closed, but he knew that no matter how tired she was, the girl would never be able to fall asleep.

Inclining his head with his resolve deepening, the older teenager bent to retrieve something from under the floorboards before quickly straightening. There was now a round bottle in his hands.

“Take it.” He handed her a blue potion. “It’s a mild Sleeping draught.”

“Tom,” she protested weakly, trying to hand the bottle back.

He shook his head. “Take it.” Tom forced it into her hands. “It will help you sleep. Something you desperately need, especially with that Marge woman coming – if she is anywhere near as bad as you said.” His patented superior smirk appeared on his lips with the last sentence, knowing he had won.

Holly merely frowned and after a second’s hesitation downed the potion. Listlessly, she got under the covers, not even bothering to change, Saladin slithering up to lie on her pillow. In the background, she heard Tom turn off the lights.

“Goodnight, Holly,” he murmured, moving the desk chair over to the window so that he could read by the moonlight.

“Night,” the girl responded softly and rolled over. She laid there for several moments, allowing the draught to kick in, and just as a restful sleep claimed her, Holly mumbled, “Happy birthday to me.”

The next day was one of the most trying in Holly Potter's short life, and it only led to one of the most difficult weeks. She woke up rather rested just after dawn with Tom nowhere in sight. This, however, didn't surprise her in the slightest since she knew that he needed to return to the diary for several hours of hibernation each day. It wasn't truly sleep, but that was the closest term they could come up for it.

After making sure he was in fact in his diary, Holly changed out of her clothes from the day previous, which had been slept in, and headed off to take a quick shower.

Approximately a half-hour later, she was washed, dressed in her Petunia cast-offs instead of her nice things, and already downstairs making breakfast. The girl had a plan to get her Hogsmeade form signed, and she might as well ingratiate herself with the Dursleys a bit along the way.

From what she had learned from Vernon's thoughts the day before, Marge believed that she attended St. Brutus' Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Children. With this in mind, it would be ridiculously easy to threaten the Dursleys into signing, lest she let the truth slip. Thankfully, her scheme worked well enough, and after several threats, Vernon was sufficiently cowed into agreeing if Holly behaved. The Slytherin couldn't help but smile to herself as she put away the dishes, sufficiently pleased.

Unfortunately, her good mood didn't last long since soon enough the doorbell rang, and she was forced into the entranceway by Petunia. Holly opened the door, only to be unceremoniously shoved to the side as Marge rushed in to find her nephew. The enormous woman, who looked like Vernon but with a less bushy moustache, threw her travel case into Holly's arms, knocking the small girl to the ground. Marge, however, didn't seem to notice. She was too preoccupied with greeting her nephew, read squeezing his blubbery body, and trying to keep her crotchety dog, Ripper, from biting him at the same time.

A round of greetings later, the Dursley family trooped into the parlour, ignoring Holly, who was still struggling to her feet. The Slytherin

merely growled at this and finally managed to stand, then proceeding to heave the gigantic bag upstairs and into the guest room.

Such behaviour was repeated when she came back downstairs with Marge actually telling Holly that she should have been left at the orphanage. It was only thought of the Hogsmeade form that kept the girl from talking back, and the Snape-like sneer the Slytherin wore for the rest of the day made Marge rather uneasy and kept her from further comment.

In true Marjorie Dursley fashion, similar comments remained the standard for the rest of the week she was staying. On one memorable occasion over lunch the third day, the rotund woman even commented that Vernon and Petunia were not to blame for how their freakish niece had turned out.

As Marge put it, "It's one of the basic rules of breeding. You see it all the time with dogs. If there's something wrong with the bitch, there'll be something wrong with the pup."

By that point, Holly was shaking with ill-suppressed rage. As such, she had quite the time reining in her magic, which kept threatening to burst forth. She did manage to keep most of it in check but apparently not enough as large cracks formed on Marge's wine glass. Thankfully, Petunia shooed the girl away afterwards, or there was no telling what she might have done.

Looking back on it, Holly wasn't exactly sure how she managed to get through the next few days, though she suspected it was due in large part to Tom and her constant focus on him. She was doubly confounded when she factored in her Mind Magic, which had started to go haywire after the incident with the wine glass. It wasn't that Holly was losing control, as her telepathy seemed fine enough; it was more like her other abilities seemed to take on a will of their own. Or perhaps it was that her brain simply didn't feel like being caged anymore, as if the thing needed to keep it in check was no longer there. Even Tom's calming if cynical presence wasn't enough to keep them at bay.

Before that week, Holly had indeed moved things with her thoughts, the most notable being the spell she had deflected at Lockhart and

when she had shoved Dudley to the ground. Nevertheless, the Slytherin had only just begun to consider the possibility that she was a telekinetic, but during Marge's stay, it became readily apparent she was one.

To this, it wasn't unusual for things to suddenly start moving on their own without anyone visibly touching them. Nor was it odd for things to shake all but imperceptibly when she was feeling particularly emotional.

Luckily, it hadn't happened in front of the Dursleys yet, and Holly put that to the fact she had been practicing control. However, when she was alone or when just Tom was with her, Holly's abilities seemed to take that as the go ahead to misbehave. It was doubly fortunate that it seemed the Ministry did not or **couldnot** track telekinesis, despite whatever extra wards were layered on Privet Drive, as she had not received a single warning for her magic.

Holly's trials and tribulations aside, the final day of Marge's stay came with much praise to the Maker on the Slytherin's part. That evening, they made it all the way through supper and to desert without a single mention of the girl or her faults. They were just finishing up with Dudley on his fourth slice of pie, Petunia drinking coffee, and Vernon and Marge consuming large amounts of brandy when the hefty woman decided to take up her favourite topic: Holly bashing.

Marge let out a rich burp, patting her huge stomach. "Pardon me, but I do like to see a healthy-sized boy." She smiled at Dudley... or more like in his direction as she was too intoxicated for her eyes to completely focus. "You'll be a proper-sized man, Dudders, like your father." She held out her empty glass. "I'll have a spot more brandy, Vernon. Now, this one here." She jerked her hand toward Holly, a hard and dangerous look on her piggy face. The woman sneered.

But Holly had received worse ones from Professor Snape, so she wasn't intimidated in the least.

"This one's got a mean, runty look to her. You get that with dogs. I had Colonel Fubster drown one last year." She eyed Holly, trying to focus her vision and actually succeeding. Marge took in the girl's

slight appearance and lack of height. "Ratty little thing it was. Weak. Underbred."

Holly felt a tingle of forewarning, and her gaze darted to Petunia, pleading for her to be excused. But the horsy-faced woman was feeling particularly vindictive at the moment and merely curled her lip. So instead, the Slytherin focused her thoughts, locking on Tom's presence upstairs and trying not to listen.

"It all comes down to blood, as I was saying the other day. Bad blood will out. Now, I'm saying nothing against your family, Petunia, but your sister was a bad egg," Marge stated nastily, attempting to pat Petunia's hand but missing. "They turn up in the best families. Then, she ran off with a wastrel, and here's the result right in front of us."

The girl trembled as another inkling of forewarning went down her spine, and she knew something very bad was about to happen. Tom must have felt it also, or maybe it was his senses she was tapping into because she noticed his sudden attention in the back of her mind.

Marge didn't take note of any of it. "This Potter... you never told me what he did." The woman seized the brandy bottle and started to drink directly out of it.

Vernon sniffed. "He... didn't work," he put in, glancing at his wife and then Holly. "Unemployed."

The Slytherin stiffened, weighing her options.

"As I expected." She took another swig of alcohol. "A no-account, good-for-nothing, lazy scrounger, who--"

"May I please be excused?" Holly interrupted rising to her feet. Without waiting for a reply, she stepped from her chair and went around the table.

There was a flash of forewarning, but she was trapped between Marge and the wall, unable to go anywhere but forwards. A firm hand on her wrist stopped her entirely as Holly attempted to do so.

“I didn’t say you could leave, girl!” Marge gurgled, squeezing half of Holly’s wand-arm in her shovel-like hand.

The Slytherin was fortunate that she decided to wear her holster on her ankle where it was less noticeable. Else, her wand would probably be ruined by now.

“Let go.”

It was not a request.

Already, she could feel her magic rising to come to her aid, and Holly knew she wouldn’t even need to go for her wand.

Marge sneered again, grounding the girl’s bones together. “No, you need to hear this, you nasty little beggar,” she spat. “Proud of your parents, are you? They go and get themselves killed in a car crash – drunk, I expect – and left you to be a burden on their decent, hardworking relatives.” She squeezed the Slytherin’s wrist again, and Holly knew she would have a nasty bruise in the morning.

If it wasn’t also broken, that was.

The girl tried to pull back, but she was held tight. “Let go of me,” she bit out, feeling her magic churn within her.

“No!”

Marge jerked Holly forward so that the girl was centimetres from her face, the woman’s rancid breath choking her victim. She now gripped the child so hard that her hand was white.

The girl’s arm actually made a popping noise. Holly felt something in her wrist snap, and she bit back a cry of pain.

Marge just chuckled maliciously. “You’re an insolent, ungrateful little--”

But unexpectedly, the woman suddenly stopped. It seemed like words were actually failing her. Marge was swelling with anger, her eyes filling with it and practically bulging out of her head.

Seconds passed, and the swelling didn't stop. Her face expanded so that she could no longer use her bulbous lips. Buttons popped off of her tweed jacket as her stomach was now too huge to be held in. Her fingers swelled and were no longer able to hold onto the girl, who jerked away. Marge's entire body was now inflated, and it started to rise out of her chair.

"MARGE!" Vernon and Petunia shrieked together.

Dudley simply stared, open-mouthed with part of his pie dropping to the table. Ripper came skidding into the room, barking like mad.

Holly barely even noticed any of it as she dashed away at top speed. She heard a yell of "NOOOOOOOOO!" in the background and the sound of the dog ripping into someone, but she paid it no mind as she ran to the cupboard under the stairs. The door burst open without prompting, her trunk appearing outside on its own. Holly was about to dart upstairs to fetch Tom and her things, but he saved her the trouble as he rushed downstairs, carrying Hedwig's empty cage and all the rest of her belongings in two pillowcases. Her trunk opened of its own accord, and Tom threw the make-shift sacks in before spelling the cage small. He promptly added that, too, closing the trunk and locking it.

"Let's go," he said reaching for her hand automatically. Thankfully, it was her left and not her injured right.

She simply bowed her head, cradling her damaged wrist to her chest.

"I'll look at it after we're gone," Tom put in swiftly, moving to take her trunk.

Just then, Vernon burst into the entry way, his leg bleeding profusely. "COME BACK IN HERE! COME BACK AND PUT HER RIGHT" he bellowed at Holly, but at the sight of another person, he stopped short. "WHO THE BLOODY HELL ARE--"

Somehow, Holly's wand appeared in Tom's hand, though she wasn't quite sure how that happened. He flourished it at Vernon, pointing the tip directly at him. The teenager quickly transferred his grip on Holly to the upper part of her injured arm so that she could grab her trunk.

"It doesn't matter. We're leaving," Tom put in smoothly and rather coldly, brandishing her wand in Vernon's face. "We're leaving, and you are not going to stop us, Dursley." His eyes blazed, burning with power. Holly's wand shot green and gold sparks, one of them hitting the now white-faced Vernon in the nose and causing it to scorch.

This and the fact Vernon had been so startled by the older Slytherin's sudden appearance, in wizarding robes no less, caused the burly man to fail to note the slight blurring of Tom at the edges. Dursley didn't even realise the person standing in front of him wasn't anything but completely solid. He was too focused on the wand centimetres from his forehead for anything else to register.

"We're going now," Tom went on, even more power going into the wand and a deep red creeping in around the edge of his irises. Although his tone remained completely smooth, his words promised pain. "I dare you to stop us."

Vernon shook his head meekly, gaping into Tom's magically blazing eyes before turning tail and hustling back to the dining room and out of sight. The teenager sneered after him and wordlessly flicked Holly's wand, the front door opening. With that, the pair was outside, Tom stashing her wand in his sleeve and taking her trunk after he cast a quick Feather-Weight charm on it. His free hand was once more clasped around Holly's uninjured one, pulling her along beside her.

Minutes later, they were several streets away, and Tom halted them by a low wall in Magnolia Crescent. Holly, in the meantime, was very wide-eyed and trembling faintly, more from shock than anything else. Part of her wondered when she would receive notice of her expulsion as she had pretty much obliterated the Restriction of Underage Magic, not even counting the untraceable spells Tom had cast with her wand.

Another part of her was focused on the fact that Tom had basically revealed himself to Vernon. There was a chance that Dursley would tell, but in her heart of hearts, Holly wasn't too worried. After all, the man had no idea who had just been at his house, and he certainly wouldn't let the Ministry perform any additional spells to find out. Further, she doubted that Vernon had really even noticed what his

uninvited guest looked like outside of the wand he carried. The man probably hadn't even realised that the teenager was blurred around the edges, something that could have easily been missed in the shadowy entrance way.

"Here," Tom commanded gently, interrupting her wool-gathering, "let me see your wrist."

In all the excitement and with all the adrenalin, Holly had almost failed to remember that. Without warning, her arm throbbed rather painfully, and she hissed. Her wrist was simply letting her know that she may have forgotten about it, but that it hadn't forgotten her.

There was a rustle of fabric as her wand was taken out again, and she turned towards her companion.

Tom didn't even have to voice a spell, simply lighting her wand and holding it in front of him so that he could look at her arm. He turned her hand over, looking this way and that, his fingers gently trailing over the already badly purpling and swelling area.

"How bad is it?" she asked, biting her lip against a sudden jolt of pain. "Is it broken?" she questioned, despite the fact she already knew the answer. The girl could distinctly recall hearing it pop earlier.

Holly almost whimpered as Tom lightly ran his hands over her skin.

"I definitely think it's broken, Hols, and I don't know how to fix this. I guess, I can cast a Numbing charm on it... or maybe make a make-shift splint, but I don't think it will hold long." He inspected her arm again. "We can go to Diagon Alley and get someone there to look it over. That's about all we can do unless we go to St. Mungo's, but I don't know where that is."

The girl weakly nodded. But unexpectedly, she felt a tingle of foreboding shoot down her spine, and her mental senses were going off in alarm. There was something nearby... something with an almost human mind.

She nudged Tom, and he turned the wand-light to the alleyway next to them. They both bent forward to look inside. It was still dark,

despite the light, and they would barely see the walls and the trash bins. However, there was just enough illumination to make out the bulky outline of something massive, something the size of a small pony.

Holly took a step back, her legs hitting her trunk. She would have tripped had Tom not steadied her. She turned her head to thank him, but the gigantic shadow caught her eye once more. She whipped back around, only to see that standing less than a metre away from them was a dog. An enormous, black dog.

And even as Holly gazed at it, taking in its massive form, she couldn't help but absentmindedly note that for its size the dog was skeletally thin. It looked as though it was half-starved, and a pang of pity shot through her, in spite of the situation. She knew what it was like to go hungry, and she wouldn't wish that on anyone. Without meaning to, the girl looked into the animal's eyes, rather taken aback by dog's intense stare as its gaze flickered from her face to her injured wrist and back.

Suddenly, she inhaled, a memory rising to the forefront of her mind.

There was a man with inky-black hair and the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen. They were blue surrounded by rings of pure grey, like sapphires set in silver.

And the dog she was looking at had the exact same eyes.

Her mental senses were screaming at her that there was a connection between the two, that the dog had a mind too human-like for it to be a coincidence. But it couldn't be him; it couldn't possibly be him. A dog couldn't also be a person, or would it be a person couldn't also be a dog?

But how else would an animal have a human's eyes?

And it just didn't make any sense. It didn't make sense at all, but the memory forced its way to the forefront of her thoughts once more. The man's blue eyes now seemed to be mocking her.

There was a single word on her mind, just one, and Holly just couldn't help herself. She breathed it out softly.

"Sirius?"

AN: Wow! Third year already! I know that there is a bit of an introduction with Tom in the beginning, but I had to fill in what was going on with the pair of them. Yes, Dudley has a thing for her, but I figure that with a female character he would. He seems like the type to try something as well.

Also, in the book, Marge was supposed to arrive on Harry's birthday, but I put it off a day. It doesn't really matter either way, I suppose.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks

Chapter Twenty-Five: A Sirius Situation

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Twenty-Five: A Sirius Situation

There was a single word on her mind, just one, and Holly just couldn't help herself. She breathed it out softly.

"Sirius?"

Holly had never seen a dog gape before, but that was exactly what this one was doing. Wide blue-silver eyes were simply staring at her, and the animal's mouth dropped open. He, for the girl was certain it was a he, made a strange sound at the back of his throat, almost like he was choking.

Automatically, she took a tentative step forward. "Sirius, is that you?" Holly whispered, and her head cocked to the side as she continued to study the creature. She stared, seeming very dazed, like she was under some sort of spell.

Next to her, Tom blinked. His gaze drifted from his friend to the animal and back, utter confusion written across his face. The teenager quickly reached for her as she took another step, grabbing hold of the hem of her shirt and stepping up next to her.

"Holly, what are you--" he began, but she didn't seem to be paying attention.

Instead, the third-year moved forward once more, now within a metre of the dog. She continued to stare into the animal's eyes, and an expression of comprehension, of complete recognition, crossed her face. At the back of her thoughts, a churning memory unexpectedly came to the forefront. In her mind's eye, Holly saw the same dark-haired man she had remembered earlier, bounding around and unexpectedly transforming into an enormous, black dog mid-bounce.

And everything became clear.

The girl stepped forward again, now just a pace away from the creature, and she murmured with awe, "It **is** you. I know it."

The animal froze and made another choking sound, gaping at her even more. The dog's eyes flickered around, as though he was

looking for escape. The creature glanced back to Holly, a strange flash crossing his doggy features. He stared at her, taking in her pleading eyes, noticing her companion blink again beside her, and he momentarily wondered just who the boy was and why he was there. More importantly, the dog wondered about his connection to Holly and why he didn't seem to have a scent.

The canine eyed the street behind the two Slytherins once more before turning to look over his shoulder. Only a few rubbish bins and a very tall fence were behind him, and it was far too high for him to jump or climb. For all intents and purposes, the dog was trapped.

The only exit was directly beyond the boy and girl, and he wasn't even that certain he truly wanted to leave. He had just found what he'd lost for the last twelve years, and he wasn't about to give it up now.

In the meantime, Tom stared at her, too, clearly thinking that his companion was having some sort of breakdown.

"Holly, I... that is to say..."

He slumped, shaking his head, not entirely sure what to tell her. He fought the urge to shift from foot to foot awkwardly. Instead, Tom merely settled for glancing between his seemingly *Confused* friend and the dog, thinking that they really didn't have time for this. For all they knew, the Aurors would be swarming them within minutes. It was that very thought that finally ignited his brain, allowing him to come up with something that resembled a coherent sentence.

"We need to get out of here," Tom submitted firmly as he tugged on her shirt, trying to pull her away, but she didn't really seem to hear him. "Holly, we have to leave," he started again, his hand now on her shoulder.

However, she didn't respond, simply looking at the dog with a strange expression on her face.

"Are you even listening to me? We have to go."

Holly paid him no mind. She was too entranced by the canine, just watching the blasted thing. The girl managed to free herself from Tom without even meaning to and inched closer to the animal. She reached out with a trembling hand, even as her friend tried to stop her.

“Holly!”

She simply ignored him, all her attention focused on the dog. “Please... please don’t go,” Holly all but begged the animal. “Stay. Please stay. Don’t leave.”

The animal exhaled very slowly, knowing in his heart what he was already going to do. He slowly sat on his haunches, whimpering at the movement. A small smile crossed her lips as he lowered, and she moved the final centimetres forward until her good hand was on the creature’s head, her injured wrist tucked in next to her chest. The girl was about to speak to him again and had actually opened her mouth to do so, but a hand on her shoulder halted the action. She finally looked up at Tom, blinking like she was coming out of a trance.

“Holly, we have to go. We have to leave now. We can’t stay,” the teenager stated, emphasising each phrase. “You’re still injured. We need to go to Diagon now to have someone look at you. Besides, the Min--”

Tom came to a crashing halt as he noted the animal’s odd behaviour at his last sentence. He saw the dog’s head swivel from the girl to him and back, eyeing her as if the thing actually understood. The canine poked his nose at her arm, immediately homing in on the hurt part.

She immediately recoiled and hissed.

The dog rose up then, and Holly and Tom both froze, the boy shifting both of them to the side and out of harm’s way. However, the animal merely took a step back.

“Stay,” the girl murmured faintly, albeit somewhat frantically, thinking that the animal was going to flee. “Don’t leave me.”

Liquidy eyes stared at her sadly, and the dog shook his head, as if to say he wouldn’t. He eyed her injured arm and then her. He inclined

his head, as though thinking. Then, he nodded, just a barely perceptible lowering of his snout.

The animal seemed to have come to some sort of decision.

Suddenly, there was a muffled pop, and a man was standing where the dog had just been. He had pale, waxy skin that was pulled tightly over his skull, as if he hadn't eaten steadily for several years. His black hair was long, reaching to his waist, but was knotted and tangled. He smiled tentatively at Holly, showing yellowed and broken teeth. Yet, regardless of his haggard and hollow appearance, his eyes still managed to have some brightness, shining at the girl despite the darkness of the alleyway.

Tom reacted on pure instinct, even as his mouth dropped open involuntarily. He pulled both of them back, trying to go for the entrance to the alley, but she just wouldn't budge. Her wand was already raised in his other hand, pointing directly at the stranger's chest.

He looked familiar, so very familiar, but for the life of him, Tom just couldn't place him.

The man's eyes flickered to the wand, but he chose to ignore it momentarily and took a step forward. He reached for Holly, lifting a hand toward the stunned girl, like he just wanted to make sure she was real.

But the other Slytherin was having nothing of that.

"Try it, and I swear that I will, Animagus," Tom coldly informed the man, immediately identifying him for what he was and brandishing Holly's wand. Angry green and gold sparks shot out, but the other male didn't even flinch.

He simply continued to look at Holly, watching her with something bordering on awe. In turn, she was staring back at him, her face completely unreadable. Tom, on the other hand, just growled, considering his options.

"I'm not here to hurt her," came a croaking and hollow voice, one which Tom belatedly identified as belonging to the stranger. "I don't want to hurt her," he continued in the same cracked tone, which obviously suffered from lack of use. He took another tentative step, and the male Slytherin went to intercept.

"Don't, Tom," Holly inserted suddenly, abruptly coming back to herself, and her friend could already see the determination on her face as she stepped between the two. "I believe him," she intoned, half-turning so that she could look at both of them. "I know that he's telling the truth."

Holly sent a mental poke to the other Slytherin, letting him know just why she believed the man. Obviously, she had used her Mind Magic at some point in the last few minutes.

"He isn't here to harm us," she said, trying to placate Tom. Holly put her hand on his wand arm, lowering it to point at the ground.

Tom clearly looked sceptical. "Why is he here then? And for that matter, who is he?" the teenager demanded, gesturing emphatically. He looked first at Holly and then at the Animagus, who was so very familiar.

Belatedly, as he took in the stranger's worn appearance, Tom realised where he recognised him from. This man was the same one from the newspaper, the one Holly had stared at for hours, and Tom suddenly remembered his name.

"You're Sirius Black."

Instantly, Tom moved to lift Holly's wand again, only to realise that he no longer held it. He glanced up at Holly, noticing that she momentarily smirked at him as she fingered her wand.

The man gave them a yellowed grin. "Yes, yes, I am."

Somehow, Tom put two and two together, getting sixteen. "You're on the run from the Ministry," he concluded, taking in the fact that this man was obviously a wizard and that he was an escaped convict, too.

Pain flashed across Sirius' face, but it was gone in an instant. "I can explain but not here," he said in his croaking voice. "It's too open, and we don't know who might be listening. You'll just have to trust me."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Tom felt the hysterical urge to laugh. "Trust you? We don't even know you!" he inserted fiercely.

"Tom," Holly chastised, her gaze flickering to him before returning to Sirius. "No, we can't stay here. I had a spot of trouble with my relatives," she admitted at the man's questioning expression. "I confess that I magic might have occurred as we were leaving."

Sirius blinked. "Where are you going?" he asked, face darkening as he processed the information.

His expression further soured when he realised what Holly had admitted to, and he wondered why she had to leave. He knew she lived with the Dursleys, Lily's spiteful sister and her spawn, so he cringed as he imagined what just might have happened to her there, though her current appearance gave him a fair idea.

Tom looked ready to say something nasty, but the female Slytherin beat him to it. "Diagon Alley, but just for a few days."

"I'm going with you," Sirius asserted vehemently. "I have so much to tell you, Holly," he added, looking at her thoughtfully.

"Really? And how do you expect to pull that one off?" Tom inquired with a scathing tone. "You can't go as you are, and we are trying to be inconspicuous. A big, black dog is anything but."

Sirius looked stumped. "I don't know," he admitted rather reluctantly.

Tom sniffed disdainfully. "Well, unless you can come up with something, you can't come with us."

Sirius sent a pleading look at Holly, even as he was trying to think of something.

"I'm sorry, but we can't have that kind of attention. Besides, you'd be caught for certain," she answered, even as she wracked her brain,

trying to form a solution. She fingered her wand absentmindedly, and her eyes abruptly widened. "Tom, how good are you at Transfiguration?" she asked with bated breath.

He immediately caught on, giving a winning smile. "I happen to be brilliant at it." Tom studied Sirius with an appraising eye and chuckled forebodingly. "Though, it will be much easier if he was a dog."

"What?" Sirius questioned, but he stiffened as understanding dawned on him. "You're going to change me into something."

A flare of panic shot through him at the very idea, at the thought of being so completely helpless.

Tom sneered, picking up on the Animagus' reluctance. "Oh... ho ho. He thinks we are going to turn him into to the Ministry. He wants us to trust him but clearly does not return the favour." He made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "Well, leave then, if we are so untrustworthy. No one is asking you to stay."

Sirius froze, his eyes going dead.

The girl quickly stepped in, "I asked him to stay." She shot Tom a look. "You wanted me to trust you," Holly put in quickly, turning back to the Animagus with pleading eyes, "and now, I ask the same from you. Trust me, Sirius. We won't turn you in. I swear it."

Sirius gazed at her for a moment, searching her face for something. Whatever it was, he apparently found as he nodded curtly and transformed. He visibly steadied himself as Tom flicked her wand, and a bright, greyish light shot out of it, hitting the canine in the chest.

There was a strange pop, and where Sirius-dog had just been, there was now a fist-sized statuette of him.

"Nice," the girl stated as she bent down to retrieve the very life-like, albeit small, replica.

However, just as she straightened, she paused as something occurred to her.

"You can change him back, right?"

"Of course," he replied flippantly, watching as she tucked the figurine into her pocket. "Though, I would suggest doing it within the next two hours or so. I don't think he'll fancy what might happen if we leave him like that for longer." He chuckled to himself, idly imagining Sirius permanently stuck in miniature form.

Holly gave a weak grin, just a bare twitch of her lips as she caught his thoughts. "Thanks, Tom."

And she didn't have to say what it was for.

The teenager nodded. "Anytime."

He seemed unhappy that they weren't getting rid of the convict, but he would go along with what Holly wanted. He owed her that much.

The girl nodded back. She moved by her friend, stepping around a loose stone, but the smile slipped as she was jostled.

"We really need to have that looked at," Tom said as they moved back to her trunk, his earlier mood now seemingly forgotten. "If memory serves, there was a Healing Station at Diagon, and since we were going there anyway, we might as well stop in."

"That sounds fine to me, though anything sounds good right now." Holly sighed. "So the Knight Bus?" she asked, taking her wand from him.

He replied after a second, "I think that's about our only option." If his tired expression was anything to go by, Tom simply wanted to be out of this place.

"Do you think I should disguise myself? I might wan--" She paused mid-sentence, her eyes glazing over slightly. "Bugger!" Holly all but spat suddenly, coming back to herself. She silently berated herself, wondering how she hadn't noticed before.

Tom's head snapped to her. "What is it?"

She growled, trying to think of what to do. "Two Ministry workers are coming this way. I think one's an Auror."

The teenager swiftly went to take her trunk, but a hand on his elbow stilled him. "No, Tom, into the diary," Holly stated. "They're too close, and we can't risk them seeing you."

He shook his head forcefully. "What about you?"

Her eyes drifted half-closed as her mind sought the two Ministry members. "They're not here to cart me off to Azkaban. I think they're just making sure I'm all right."

He didn't seem to believe her, uncertainty in his eyes.

"Trust me, Tom," she begged, fetching the diary from his robe pocket. "Just go into the diary."

Her friend frowned deeply. He was about to reply, but the sound of approaching footfalls caught his attention. His gaze riveted to Holly, and he growled. Tom knew it was probably a bad idea; regardless, he complied with her request. He was gone in an instant, and she snapped the book shut. The girl quickly opened her trunk, stuffing it inside as it wouldn't fit in her pocket with Sirius there.

The lid had just closed and she was just about to take the handle when two men came around the corner. Holly whirled to face them, wand discreetly hidden in her hand.

One was dark-skinned and bald with a shiny, golden hoop in one ear. The other was average height, though he looked short next to his companion, and he had a rosy face and a stubby, brown beard. The two were dressed rather normally in shirts and trousers with no obviously magical articles in sight. They looked just like a pair of Muggle friends out for a night-time stroll, but Holly wasn't fooled. She knew they were wizards, and she knew they were looking for her.

Holly reached for her trunk, debating whether or not to run, but the pair seemed to know what she was trying to decide.

"Wait. Hold on!" the bearded man called, hurrying forward.

The sight of two wands appearing caused Holly to freeze, despite the fact that she had her own in hand. She knew there was no way she could flee in her current state, at least not with her trunk, which currently held Tom's diary. Besides, their thoughts indicated that they were here to help her, not harm her.

"I'm Kingsley Shacklebolt," the darker man calmly said, approaching her very slowly.

He was the same one she had early identified as an Auror, and her guess was confirmed as he opened his mouth again.

"I'm an Auror with the Ministry." He gently eased his hand to his pocket, removing and showing her his badge. "I'm not here to cause you any trouble, Miss Potter... Holly."

The girl stiffened at the sound of her name, watching them under her eyelashes. Kingsley seemed to pick up on her mood as he halted.

"We were notified of a surge of magic at your residence, and we came to make sure everything was all right," the bald man continued. "We found Miss Dursley, and she is now back to normal size." He paused at that comment, a strange expression on his face. His lips twitched, and the Auror looked as though he was trying not to laugh.

A subtle nudge of his companion's elbow to his side brought him back to the topic at hand.

"This is Amos Diggory." Shacklebolt indicated the other man, but his eyes seemed to be dancing with mirth. "He's an Obliviator, and he's modified the memories of Miss Marjorie Dursley. "

"She doesn't remember a thing," Diggory inserted quickly, "though your guardians do." The soft and encouraging smile on his face did nothing to cover his mental disgust at the thought of the Dursleys. He had not been impressed by the Girl-Who-Lived's guardians, not at all.

The two men silenced after that, clearly wanting her to put forth some response. A minute passed without her saying anything; she lightly touched their minds and further gauged them. They both possessed mental shields, but she gleaned enough from their surface thoughts

to know that they were telling the truth. Finally, just as Diggory was about to speak again, the Slytherin opened her mouth.

“Shacklebolt did you say? Are you related to Titania?” Holly inquired slowly, easing her arm from her chest just a bit.

It was a movement that both Ministry workers saw; they had been discreetly eyeing her for several moments.

The Auror smiled at the question. “My niece. She’s told me some about you. Says you’re quite good at Defence,” he replied, even as he wondered if the girl was injured.

If she was, the Dursleys hadn’t mentioned it.

Come to think of it, they hadn’t mentioned much of anything. The horsy-faced woman had merely screeched wordlessly, while clutching at her son, who had looked on confusedly and blubbered some. The man of the family had been particularly quiet, not actually making any sound at all and seeming as though he had recently had fear of the Maker put into him.

Holly nodded at the comment, drawing Shacklebolt back into the present.

“We’re here to take you somewhere safe,” Kingsley responded to her unvoiced inquiry, grinning and showing his very white teeth.

“I’m not going back,” Holly stated in a calm voice, belying the churning of her stomach.

“And we’re not here to take you,” the Auror hastily assured. “We just want to take you somewhere safe. Is there anywhere you can go? A friend’s house perhaps?”

Her mind instantly jumped to Blaise, but reality came crashing down on her. He was currently visiting his aunt in Spain and wouldn’t be back for two days, a fact she had forgotten until then.

Her thoughts next went to Draco, but she wasn’t entirely sure that was a good idea either. No Ministry worker worth their Galleons

would ever allow her to stay with the Malfoys, regardless of the fact the Lucius was found innocent. That same line of thought led her to immediately cross both Theo and Pansy off her list.

Luna and her father weren't at home, away in Devon, looking for Crumpled-horned snorkaks. Milli was definitely an option, but Holly had never met her parents before and wasn't sure if they would appreciate her dropping in on their doorstep. The same was true for her other Slytherin friends, which only left one other family. And there was no way she would spend any more time than necessary with Ginny or Ron, despite how much she liked Fred and George.

Holly blinked up at Shacklebolt as he stepped closer to her, tearing herself away from her thoughts and looking into their questioning faces.

"I... was just going to go to Diagon Alley," the girl replied with the slightest hitch of hesitation. "I was supposed to stay with Blaise... Blaise Zabini," she clarified, "starting on Saturday anyway."

Diggory gazed at her for a moment. "Can you not stay with him now?"

"He's away, out of the country," the Slytherin replied.

Kingsley and Amos exchanged the barest of glances, which she still managed to catch. She also caught the whirl of their thoughts and their quiet contemplations about the situation. To them, it wasn't the best of solutions, but it would have to do. Besides, they couldn't have her out on the streets, not with Black on the loose.

Holly puzzled at this last thought, almost missing Diggory's response.

"That sounds fine to me," the bearded man said.

"Yes, it does," Kingsley replied, bending down to pick up a loose rock from the ground before turning to his companion. "Amos, why don't you return to the others and let them know we have her. In the meantime, I'll make a Portkey and escort Holly here to the Leaky Cauldron."

Both Diggory and the girl picked up on the unspoken message, though the two men didn't know about the latter fact.

For all intents and purposes, he might as well have said, "Let them know that Black doesn't have her. I'll keep her safe on the way to the pub and make sure that she actually gets there."

The Obliviator inclined his head. "Fine. Into the alley then. Can't be seen, after all. I don't fancy modifying anymore memories tonight."

He went into the alleyway that Holly had just found Sirius in not a half-hour earlier. Reluctantly, the girl followed with Kingsley bringing up the rear, wheeling her trunk behind him.

"You two first," Diggory stated when he deemed them far enough along. "I'll leave after you."

The Auror shrugged, studying his pebble. "Hm... it's a bit small," Shacklebolt commented idly, tapping it with the tip of his wand.

The rock grew from the size of a fingernail to that of a flattened hand.

"Portus."

The stone glowed blue for an instant.

"Shall we?" He offered the rock to her. "Just a finger on it will be enough, though you might want to stand close to me, so I can catch you if you fall."

Holly frowned, not liking that all, but she did as he bade, actually brushing against him now. She fought the urge to flinch at the contact, memories of her recent treatment at Marge's hands floating to the forefront of her mind. Her friends and the Zabinis were one thing, a complete stranger she had known for less than a half-hour was quite another. Holly wasn't comfortable being this close to him, especially not without anyone else she trusted around.

Kingsley gave her a reassuring grin, but it didn't really work. "Ready? Three... two... one..."

And suddenly, there was a jerk beneath her navel as her feet left the ground. She felt herself bump more fully into Shackbolt, though her finger was still firmly stuck to the enlarged stone. The pair of them flew through space for several seconds before their feet were slammed onto the floor. The girl staggered somewhat, managing to keep standing partially thanks to the arm Kingsley had wrapped around her shoulders.

Holly glanced around as the Auror steadied her. They appeared to actually be inside the pub, in a tea room that was currently empty of other people, but she felt the definite tingle of multiple minds in close proximity. She noted Shackbolt step away from her side and turned to watch him walk to the nearby door. He stuck out his head into what she assumed was a hallway and called to someone, receiving a muffled response that the girl didn't quite catch.

Knowing she probably wasn't meant to hear and couldn't anyway, Holly turned her attention to the throbbing part of her body. Apparently, it hadn't really liked the Portkey trip, not that she could blame it. She hadn't liked the journey either.

The Slytherin cautiously lifting her arm from her chest, ghosting her fingers over the edge of her long sleeve. She hesitated easing the edge up, knowing that it would not be a good idea with the Auror so close by. It wouldn't do to let him see how badly she was really hurt.

"Why don't you let me take a look at that?" the bald man asked as he returned from the door, which was now firmly shut.

"No, thank you," Holly inserted quickly, not at all willing to let him inspect her. She trusted him enough to take her to the Leaky Cauldron, but that was it.

Besides, if he looked, he would be sure to see the finger-like bruises that were already purpling around it. That would lead to awkward questions, something she couldn't allow, especially not since she still needed the blood protection offered at Privet Drive.

If only she and Blaise had been able to come up with a better option before the summer.

"It's nothing," she assured him after a moment. "I simply fell and caught myself wrong. I'll be fine by morning, Auror Shacklebolt."

He didn't seem to believe her but wasn't sure what else to do.

"Call me Kingsley, and here, take this. It should help." The man reached into one of the compartments of the odd belt at his waist, pulling out a potion bottle. "Standard Auror fare," he explained at her inquiring look. "A mild Pain potion that will allow you to keep a clear head, while not letting you forget that you're hurt."

Holly studied him for a second, determining that he was telling the truth. She took the offered bottle, studying the soft-green substance inside. The girl downed it in one gulp. Surprisingly, it tasted faintly of mint. Better yet, the now jabbing pain dulled to a mere tingle across her skin.

"Thank you," the Slytherin said honestly.

"You're welcome. Though, I really think you should have someone look at that. There's a Healing Station on the other side of the entrance to the Alley. I could take you--"

The rest of his sentence was cut off by the entrance of two people.

"Ah, Tom," Kingsley stated cheerfully before turning to the other newcomer. "Minister Fudge," he continued in a much more impartial tone.

Holly neutrally looked at the man in the lime-green bowler hat, fighting the urge to frown as the Minister turned to her.

"Hello, Holly," he greeted jovially before turning to the others. "See to her room, will you, Tom? That will be all, Auror Shacklebolt." Fudge dismissed them with a wave.

The barkeep beamed and went for the door, taking her trunk with him. On the other hand, Kingsley looked ready to object, looking her over once again, but Holly beat him to it.

“Thank you for everything, Mr. Shacklebolt,” the girl said softly, giving him a faint smile. “Kingsley,” she corrected after a beat.

He continued to look at her for a minute, eyes lingering on a particular spot. His unspoken message was clear: “Get that checked out.”

And Holly nodded.

With that reassurance, the Auror finally left.

What followed was probably one of the most arduous half-hours of Holly Potter’s short life, including Marge’s recent holiday stay. After a brief introduction that the girl didn’t truly need as she had seen him before, not that he knew, Fudge set about recapping everything Shacklebolt and Diggory had told with less emphasis on individual efforts and with more on the girl’s foolishness for leaving. From there, he ventured to her summer plans, frowning noticeably when she mentioned the Zabinis.

Throughout it all, Holly thankfully minded her manners, no doubt doing Eren Zabini proud. She properly greeted the man and listened to him with a calm if neutral face. However, inside, she was seething and occasionally shuddering.

This was the same man who had dragged Hagrid off and sent him to Azkaban with little evidence and no trial, and she couldn’t help but despise him for that. Not to mention, that he had one of the slimiest minds she had ever encounter, including Lockhart. It was simpering and weak and altogether too easy for her to pick up on his rancid and vapid thoughts. He had no mental shielding at all, and if Holly had so desired, she could have learned his entire life story in a manner of moments.

If she didn’t know any better, and she was actually beginning to think that it might just be true, the Slytherin might have suspected that it was all a sham, that he really did have shielding and that it was secretly hidden under all rubbish. If that were so, then Fudge was far more devious than she gave him credit, and he warranted close watching. On the other hand, she might just be reading too much into it.

Regardless, of her conundrum and her dislike of his mind and the situation, Holly did manage to find out several fascinating things from Fudge. The first was that the Ministry was having no luck in hunting down Sirius; they didn't even know he was an Animagus! Second, Holly learned that Sirius had supposedly served Voldemort and that he had killed thirteen Muggles and a wizard with only one curse. Lastly, Black was supposed to be out and after her!

Holly hadn't received a warning on accidental magic and wasn't being punished because they were simply thankful she was alive.

The girl actually shivered when she discovered the last two parts, causing Fudge to ask if she was cold.

It just didn't make any sense.

From what she had gleaned from Sirius' mind, he hadn't wanted to harm her at all. He had actually just desired to see her. Further, if Sirius was so dangerous, why did she remember him? Why would she recall a mass murderer from her memories of being a little girl?

It didn't make any sense, none at all.

And Holly considered all the angles of the mind boggling mystery, even as she fingered the dog figurine in her pocket.

Fudge thought Sirius a Death Eater and out to kill her. Yet, the man was little more than a snivelling, self-serving politician.

On the other hand, Sirius was obviously an escaped criminal, but his thoughts showed that he was sincere in his desire to help her. Additionally, she knew this man; she felt connected to him. She could feel her magic, her telepathy pulling her to him, telling her reach out to him. Her abilities had never been wrong before. They had guided her to Blaise, her truest and dearest friend, and then Draco. They had led her to Luna, and they had urged her to trust Tom, even when the evidence seemed against him.

However, her internal debate was soon interrupted when Fudge glanced at the wall clock and ushered her to the door of the tea room. He turned her over to the barkeep and went on his bumbling way.

In turn, Tom the elder led Holly upstairs to what she assumed would be her room for the next few days. It was nice inside with her unopened trunk in front of a large bed, and there was an attached toilet and a few windows. Further, it was tucked in a quiet corner, far away from the noisy dining room.

“Anything else you need, Miss Potter?” the innkeeper asked as she inspected her quarters, beaming as usual.

Holly was about to say no, but her mind drifted to Sirius and his emaciated appearance.

“Yes, some supper, if you wouldn’t mind?” the girl responded.

If it was possible, and apparently it was, the toothless man’s grin widened. “Sure. It’ll be up in a tick.”

Holly nodded and retrieved the other Tom’s diary from her trunk just after the door shut.

Just a few more minutes, and then, you can come out, she wrote.

How’s everything?

Fine. I’ll explain more in a bit, the girl responded, setting the diary on the bed and moving to both the wardrobe mirror and the one she had earlier glimpsed in the toilet.

From past experience, she knew that mirrors could be enchanted just like portraits, and it wouldn’t do for anyone, even if they weren’t technically alive, to know just what company she was currently keeping. As such, the Slytherin quickly covered them by using a nifty, little spell Gavin had taught her. It completely darkened the surface, preventing anybody in the mirror from seeing or hearing what was going on around them.

There was a knock on her door directly after she had finished, and Holly barely opened it enough for the tray to levitate in. She thanked the innkeeper and bid him goodnight, firmly shutting the door. Her eyes flickered to tray on the desk nearby, inspecting it momentarily

before returning to the diary, but not before casting a Locking charm on the door.

You can come out now, Tom, she wrote, sinking down onto the bed next to the book.

His only reply was a rush of magic and colour as he materialised right next to her.

"This is so much better," the other Slytherin commented as he stretched.

Holly merely nodded and reached into her pocket for the dog statue. She held both it and her wand out to him, and he sighed, taking only her wand and quickly casting multiple Silencing charms on the room.

After he was finished, Tom finally spoke again. "Holly, I don't think this is a good idea. We don't even know this man."

"I know him, Tom," Holly answered sternly. "I remember him."

"Remember him? He's a criminal. You can't trust him, Holly," he stated in a heated whisper, despite the fact that no one could hear them. "He's on the run from the Ministry; the Aurors are after him for certain!"

"The same way I can't trust you?" she questioned softly, her fingers tracing the design on the quilt, even as she gazed up at him.

Tom hesitated. "That's different," he bit out after a moment, feeling rather put out.

Holly raised an eyebrow in a gesture very reminiscent of Severus Snape. "Really? How so? To me, it seems to be the same." She gazed at him thoughtfully.

"It just is," he responded weakly, unable to come up with anything better.

"Tom, please." She shook her head, shoulders slumping with tiredness. "Please do this for me."

He exhaled slowly, knowing he had already lost both the battle and the war. "Fine." Tom took her wand. "The things I do for you," he murmured to himself, though she still heard.

The teenager flicked the wand and a flash of grey light hit the statuette; where it had been, there was now a giant and living canine in its place.

Instantly, the dog transformed back into a man, looking all around.

"We're in a room at the Leaky Cauldron," Holly explained to stem his confusion. "There's some food over there for you."

Sirius instantly perked up, his blue eyes shining underneath his dark hair. "Thanks." He eagerly went to the tray but paused just beside it. "What about you?"

"I've already had dinner," she responded. It was true, but that had been at the Dursleys.

Tom shot her a look but remained silent.

The man didn't say anything. He just watched her for a few more heartbeats before his hunger got the best of him. He descended on the food with glee, tearing into a roll.

In the meantime, Holly inspected herself, feeling tingly due to the potion but not painful. However, she knew that sooner or later it would wear off, and she would be back to square one.

"You really need to see a Healer," Tom put in, watching her.

She exhaled. "I know, and I will in the morning."

The other Slytherin frowned deeply. "No, you need to do it tonight. You can still go to the Healer Station. It's always manned."

"And I will... in the morning," Holly replied evenly, her eyebrows twitching.

"I can heal that for you," a croaking voice cut in, interrupting their conversation. Sirius nodded to her wrist as he put down his half-eaten roll. "I was trained as a field medic."

The girl gazed into his eyes for a minute, determinedly not looking at Tom, before quietly extending her wand to him.

"Holly," Tom warned, but it was too late.

Sirius had already left his chair and now had her wand.

Holly shrugged, and she shot her friend a look that seemed to say, "Well, you did want me to have it looked at."

The Animagus smiled brilliantly at them, showing his horrible teeth, and his hand connected with the wood. Magic surged through him, and Sirius could swear he heard Phoenix Song in the distance.

He fingered the wand for a moment, feeling magic spreading through him once again. He swished and flicked for a moment to steady the blazing stream of power, shooting red, black, and silver sparks. Finally, he turned to Holly and nodded to her resolutely.

She held out her arm, but he didn't take it.

Tom sucked in a breath, and it was only her restraining mental touch that kept him from doing something resoundingly stupid, like attack an armed man. However, Sirius merely studied her for a few moments before waving her wand. Instantly, the bruising around her break lessened, and she gave an audible sigh of relief.

The man nodded to himself and tentatively inched forward. He slowly raised his free hand to inspect her arm, just to be certain that it was healed entirely. His fingers connected with her skin, and a flash of pure magic roared through both of them.

Sirius instantaneously stiffened. Holly gasped, causing Tom's head to snap up.

"What is it?" the teenager demanded warily, trying to decide what to do.

"I..." Holly shook her head and gaped at the man. "You felt that?"

He looked at her with wide eyes as the magic faded. "Yeah," he replied hoarsely, touching her more firmly now. "This has happened before?"

The girl nodded. "A few times. Usually when I touch someone's bare skin for the first time."

"Oh." Sirius couldn't really think of anything else to say to that.

Honestly, neither could Tom. And both of them just looked at her.

Finally, after a few seconds, the Animagus turned back to the task at hand. He slowly checked her over, lightly ghosting his hands across her skin.

"Any pain? Stiffness?"

"No to the first, but it's a bit stiff," she replied. "Kingsley... er... I took a potion for it."

Sirius blinked at her, not commenting. He chewed on his lip as he rotated her hand this way and that.

"Well, it seems fine now, but I'd be careful for the next few days just to be sure." He stepped back. "Is there anything else you need healed?" the man asked softly, peering at her under his matted hair.

The girl paused, thinking about the still lingering bruises on her forearm. However, looking at Sirius, she noticed that he seemed rather tired and like he could really do with finishing his food.

"No, I'm fine. Thank you," Holly finally whispered with very pleased green eyes.

Sirius gave a slightly embarrassed twitch of his lips before handing her wand back and drifting over to the desk and his not forgotten meal. The three sat in relative silence as he ate, which was only interrupted by the occasionally scrape of his spoon or the clink of his glass.

Tom came over to inspect Holly's wrist, in turn, obviously though grudgingly pleased by how well it was now.

Minutes passed with Sirius slowly eating his meal, taking his time so that he wouldn't make himself sick. Still, he had only managed to eat about a quarter of what was offered, when he put down his spoon and leaned back in his chair, apparently finished.

Holly, who was lying on the bed, sat up, even as the man settled back.

"All right," she said softly, and both Sirius and Tom looked up. "I think that it's time for an explanation."

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Semper Fidelius

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Twenty-Six: Semper Fidelius

"I'm so sorry, Holly," Sirius put in as he finished his tale, silvery-blue eyes shiny with moisture. "You'll never know how truly sorry I am. I should've never trusted Peter." He exhaled wearily, obviously waiting for a response of some kind.

Nearby, Tom was blank-faced. His eyes merely flickered back and forth between Holly and the Animagus as he quietly listened. He was suspicious of Sirius and still undecided about the truthfulness of the man's story. However, he trusted his own Mind Magic and Holly's, both of which were urging them to not be so hasty in passing judgement.

Similarly, the girl remained silent. She stared into the distance, absorbing the information she had just been told and processing it carefully. Something in her urged Holly to believe Sirius, to trust him, and her instincts hadn't led her astray yet. But she wasn't quite sure what to say to the man. Truthfully, Holly was far too shocked by what she had just learned to form a coherent reply.

Her parents, Lily and James, had been betrayed by someone they had trusted, by their friend. They had thought that the traitor was someone else... was Remus, though Holly couldn't fathom why they would think that. Her parents had wanted Sirius to be their Secret Keeper, but he had them choose differently. He had told them that it was the ultimate bluff, a feint to throw off Voldemort and his followers. Everyone would assume that Sirius was the Secret Keeper and would go after him, while the real one remained safely concealed.

It was the perfect plan but with only one small glitch. While the Fidelius charm was powerful protection magic, it could still fail.

After all, it was only as strong as the Secret Keeper's will.

It was ironic, really. Her parents had changed Secret Keepers to the very man who would be their doom.

And to think, she had discussed this very spell with Professor Flitwick. In fact, it had been the reason she had first sought him out.

Fate had a way of coming full circle. As it had now with Sirius.

"I'm sorry, Holly," the Animagus repeated, now standing in front of her. "After Hagrid took you from me, I didn't know what else to do. Peter was still out there. He was a danger to you, and no one else knew it." Sirius gazed at Holly, willing her to look back at him. "He knew where Petunia lived. He could show up at any time... so I went after him. I hunted him down, but he tricked me."

His face took on a far away look as his mind slipped into memory. Holly finally glanced up at him, while Tom merely listened off to the side.

"When I cornered him, he yelled for the whole street to hear that I'd betrayed Lily and James," Sirius said softly, his tone full of suppressed emotion. "Then, before I could curse him, he blew apart the street with the wand behind his back. Killed everyone within twenty feet of himself... and then sped down the sewer with the other rats." The man sighed heavily. "He cut off his finger just before and left it so that everyone would think that I killed him... that I killed them all."

He trembled then, faintly at first, but it only seemed to grow. His hands shook, despite his best efforts to rein them in. But no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't stop shaking.

"I didn't do it," he whispered, even as he trembled. "I was always loyal to your parents. I never betrayed James and Lily. I'd have died before I betrayed them." He sniffed, eyes very bright. "Please, believe me."

Holly simply looked at him, reaching out with her mind. She gently ghosted his thoughts, which were clouded and shielded. Still, she didn't detect any lies or deceit. The girl only found absolute sincerity. She had been right about him earlier.

Sirius didn't want to harm her at all. He was telling the truth.

Holly pulled her mind away a moment later, nodding slowly. "I believe you." She smiled at him, and he returned it.

“Thank you,” Sirius croaked. He reached for her hand, grasping it within his own rough one, and he moved to sit down next to her.

Tom continued to watch from the side, and a strange emotion surged through him, though he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He was sceptical, but Holly seemed to truly believe the Animagus. Tom knew he could trust her judgement, but still, he had several questions that needed to be answered.

The teenager rubbed his hand over his chin thoughtfully. “Why didn't all this come out at your trial?” Tom asked after a moment, and the other two glanced at him.

At Sirius' pained expression, Holly inserted, “Wait. Let me guess. You didn't have a trial.” She gave his hand one final squeeze before releasing it.

The man shook his head. “No, why would I? Everyone already knew I was guilty. They knew I was the Secret Keeper, so they just threw me in Azkaban. They didn't even bother to question me with Vertiserum.”

“What about Remus?” Tom inquired, folding his arms over his chest. “Couldn't he have helped you? Surely, you told him... or better yet, why wasn't he the Secret Keeper?”

Sirius' head swivelled to face the teenager, and he grimaced, rubbing at the crick in his neck. “You know Remus?”

His eyes returned to Holly. There was an odd flash of thought in his mind, but it was gone in an instant.

“But you live with the Dursleys. How could you know him then?”

The girl sighed. “I met him in Diagon Alley just before first year, but not many people know that... certainly not the Dursleys.” His still confused expression, she elaborated, “I sort of recognised him, and we've been writing ever since.”

Sirius didn't really know what to say to that, so he remained quiet. Tom, on the other hand, continued his earlier line of thought.

“From what Holly’s said about Remus,” the teenager went on, “he seems far more trustworthy than Peter, so why not make him the Secret Keeper instead? You did say he was your friend as well.”

The man shifted uneasily, his eyes becoming dull. “Yes, but I also mentioned a traitor. We thought it was him... was Remus,” Sirius said with a bizarre hitch in his voice.

“Why would you think that?” Holly asked, not really liking where this was going.

The Animagus frowned noticeably, his skin pulled tight on his forehead. A torrent of emotions flashed across his face, going far too fast to be deciphered. His mouth opened and then promptly closed. He seemed to be debating himself about something, but his mind was too chaotic for Holly to determine what.

“Why did you think it was him?” she repeated, green eyes glowing.

Sirius grimaced but eventually decided that honesty was still the best policy. “We thought it was him because...” He hesitated. “You see, Remus... is a werewolf. Has been since before we went to Hogwarts,” he added very calmly, like he hadn’t just revealed something earth shattering.

Tom and Holly both froze.

“A werewolf?” she repeated dazedly. “I...” she trailed off, blinking up at Sirius.

Unexpectedly, Tom chuckled, and the other two turned to stare at him.

“You’ve the most unusual friends, Holly. I mean, first an escaped criminal and now a werewolf, not to mention the rest of us.” He snickered to himself, actually sounding amused. “It’s like the more peculiar the person, the more likely you are to befriend them.” He continued to laugh for several more minutes.

Holly blinked again, coming out of her daze. “Well... I suppose you’re right,” she conceded, thinking of her other unusual friends.

There was Blaise, child of a supposed Black Widow, and Draco, a Death Eater's son. Plus, let her not forget Luna, a Mind Mage. Of course, there was Tom himself, who was an alternate version of Lord Voldemort. Now that Holly thought about her situation, she did find it rather amusing, too.

Sirius merely looked at them, not entirely getting the joke. "So..." he began uncertainly, surprised by how well they seemed to be taking this, "you're not really bothered by it."

"Er... it's a bit of a shock," Holly admitted with a shrug, brain still caught up on her parents to really register what she had learned about Remus, "but not really. He should be safe as long as it's not the full moon, and I assume that he locks himself up then. Plus," she realised a second later, "he's your friend, and you apparently knew and trust him. And besides, he did go to Hogwarts with you. That means Dumbledore also knows."

Tom added ironically, "And if you can't trust Dumbledore, who can you trust? He obviously allowed Remus in school, so he couldn't have been too worried."

Truthfully, Tom was only a bit squeamish about the idea of a werewolf as an associate, but people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. He could hardly complain about a Dark creature when he was the Dark Lord. Besides, he was of the school of thought that Dark wasn't evil and a follower of the Old Ways to boot. Both were belief systems that didn't discriminate against lycanthropes.

"Dumbledore does know," Sirius stated in his somewhat croaky and disused voice. "We did trust him... mostly. It's just that--" He shook his head. "We knew someone close to the Potters was leaking information, and it wasn't me. So that only really left two others after Lily's best friend died. It simply never occurred to us that it could be Peter; he just didn't seem the type. When we were in school, he practically hero-worshipped James and me."

The man's eyes dulled completely, and he ran a tired hand over his face. A moment ticked by and then another, but he didn't add

anything else. Holly was about to interrupt the silence when he finally spoke again.

“Remus,” Sirius stumbled over the name, “just seemed more likely, and not only because he was a werewolf. He was smart, the top student in our class, and rather sneaky when he needed to be – first rate Slytherin material at times.”

Tom and Holly raised eyebrows at this, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“I guess he had to be to keep everyone from finding out about his condition,” the man said very calmly, as though talking about nothing more important than the weather.

Still, Holly had the distinct impression that even remembering this was very painful. There was something about Sirius’ thoughts that puzzled her, though she couldn’t quite figure out what it was. Regardless, the girl continued to listen intently.

Sirius went on, “He was well liked among our group and was in the perfect position for a lot of information about all of us. Then, there was an incident a few months after you were born.” He had the slightest hesitation before continuing. “Remus went missing on assignment. Nobody knew what had happened to him. But a week later, he just turned up again. He said that he’d been captured by Death Eaters but had escaped. At first, we believed him. However, several things didn’t add up, and he started acting peculiar afterwards. We couldn’t really blame him for the last part, but still, something just didn’t seem right.”

Sirius ran his hand over his face again, rubbing at his temples. He then shook his head and sighed.

“I just... I can’t believe we suspected him. I can’t believe I suspected him,” he added in a faint whisper that Holly barely managed to catch. “He was our friend. We shared a dorm with him for seven years. He was the mastermind of most of our pranks. Circe, we became Animagi for him.”

Holly's head snapped up. "All of you were Animagi? Even my dad?" She paused, thinking it over. "Well, I suppose if both Peter and you were, he was probably one as well."

"A werewolf is only dangerous to humans, so we kept him company as animals. As for James, he turned into a stag," Sirius said, coming out of his funk and smiling vaguely. "That's how he got his nickname Prongs."

The girl eagerly asked, "Nickname? Did everyone else have one, too?"

The man nodded, pleased by how interested she seemed. "Well, I'm Padfoot. And Peter," Sirius growled, all but spiting the name, "is Wormtail."

"What does that make Remus?" Tom asked snidely, rolling his eyes at the names. "The Beast? Howling Avenger?"

But it was Holly that answered, shooting him a displeased look. "He's Moony – for the full moon. Moony." She nodded to herself.

The older Slytherin snorted. "I think they could've come up with something better than that. It doesn't exactly take a genius to figure out he's a werewolf with that nickname, not to mention the fact that he was always gone around the full moon." Tom tilted his nose in the air. "I honestly don't see why more people didn't work it out."

Holly couldn't help but agree, but she did have enough tact not to point that out, immediately stifling her snigger and adopting a neutral expression. Meanwhile, Sirius shot a glare at the boy, clearly unhappy with what he had just said. The man was about to retort when something finally occurred to him, causing him to stop short.

"Who are you?" Sirius questioned, eyeing the teenager. He once more noted that Tom was partially transparent, though only barely.

Holly and Tom shared a subtle glance along with a wordless mental exchange. She raised an eyebrow at him, while he frowned. She nodded, but he made a sharp slashing motion with his hand. Finally, he sighed heavily, and she smirked.

Sirius simply watched, wondering why it was so hard to answer such a simply question.

"I apologise for not introducing him earlier," Holly finally replied with a faint gleam in her eyes. "This is Tom." Her smirk deepened. "He lives in my diary."

The Animagus blinked. "Er... that's a new one."

"It's a long story," Tom inserted before she could say anything else. "A very long story. All you need to know is that I can enter the diary at will and leave it much the same."

Sirius nodded, secretly wondering about Holly's life. "So... what do we do now?"

The girl considered the question. "Well, the day after tomorrow the Zabinis are coming to get me. Tom and I will spend the rest of the summer with them."

"Zabinis?"

She explained, "My friend Blaise and his family."

"What about me?" Sirius asked with bated breath. "I mean, I'd like to--"

"Come with us," Holly interrupted. "I'll just have to explain to Blaise after we get there."

Sirius' eyes widened. "No, don't. Don't tell him anything." He shook his head emphatically. "It's too risky."

Tom snorted. "Well, she can't **not** tell him. That's like asking her not to breathe," he put in with a slight sneer.

Holly inclined her head. "True," she allowed. "That's very true." She turned back to the Sirius. "I have to. I know that he won't betray your secret; I trust him with my life. Besides, he can help," she finished.

After a moment, Sirius nodded rather reluctantly, but he remained silent. Truthfully, he wasn't really sure what to say. After all, what could someone in his situation say to make it all right? What **should** he say? How should he beg her forgiveness for being gone so long? For not being there when she needed him the most?

There had to be an answer, something he could say to make it better.

He just didn't know what.

The next morning, Holly awoke very slowly with only a hint of lingering stiffness. She ordered breakfast from the innkeeper when he knocked on her door and was provided with enough to more than feed both Sirius and her with half of it still left over. She showered and dressed next, while her male companions kept each other entertained in the room proper. The girl wasn't entirely sure what they did or said, but a great deal of the tension between the two was gone when she rejoined them.

Afterwards, Holly insisted that she go out into Diagon Alley, and though neither of her companions was very pleased with it, they finally agreed. Tom transfigured Sirius back into the statuette, as there was a risk he would be discovered if left behind, before he went back into his diary. Finally, about an hour after she woke up, Holly left her room and ventured downstairs.

She greeted the innkeeper, who beamed toothlessly at her, and inquired about sending a message to the Zabinis since Hedwig was currently with them. She wanted to let them know that they would have to pick her up there instead of at Privet Drive, but Tom the elder told her that they had already been informed about her stay at the Leaky Cauldron, although they didn't know why, and that they would arrive tomorrow morning.

The Slytherin thanked him and left, arriving at the gateway a moment later. It was easy enough to enter since she had watched Hagrid do it two years earlier, memorising his motions for future reference. The Alley itself was just like she remembered, though the crowds looked more subdued than before. Holly attributed it to the fact that the supposedly insane Sirius Black was on the loose, and her suspicion

was all but confirmed when she noticed the close watch the shopkeepers were keeping on her as she ambled down the street.

Apparently, the Ministry had instructed them to do so.

Regardless of the myriad of eyes on her throughout her wanderings, the Slytherin still managed to enjoy her trip. She went to Madam Malkin's and a few other clothing stores, picking up a number of robes, dresses, etc. Then, she sauntered over to the Apothecary, refilling her Potions kit and obtaining several other ingredients the owner recommended. Holly picked up her parchment, ink, and quills next and was on her way to the bookstore when a group of people in a shop caught her attention. She strolled inside and over to the edge of the crowd, peering around a taller boy.

Just in front of her, mounted on a newly erected podium, was the most beautiful broom Holly had ever seen. It was smooth and streamlined with an almost golden sheen and perfectly aligned birch twigs in the tail, and even from several metres away, she could feel the tingle of magic in it... feel its desire to be in the sky, flying as fast as it could.

Around her, Holly could hear the various members of the crowd exclaiming that it was a prototype, the fastest broom in the world, and so on. She tilted her head to the side to get a better look, actually managing to read the nearby sign when a particularly large witch stepped out of the way.

THE FIREBOLT

This state-of-the-art racing broom sports a stream-lined, superfine handle of ash, treated with a diamond-hard polish and hand-numbered with its own registration number. Each individually selected birch twig in the broomtail has been honed to aerodynamic perfection, giving the Firebolt unsurpassable balance and pinpoint precision. The Firebolt has an acceleration of 240 kilometres an hour in ten seconds and incorporates an unbreakable Braking charm. Price on request.

Exhaling, the Slytherin all but gaped at it for a few more minutes before managing to pull herself away.

With one final look, she headed off to Flourish and Blotts, which thankfully was Lockhart-free this year. She pulled out her list and wandered over to a cage full of The Monster Book of Monsters, which were snapping and snarling at one another. A manager came over a minute later, obviously peeved when he saw what she was looking at, and pulled on a thick pair of gloves. However, the pushy man gave an audible sigh of relief when she told him that she already had a copy and was happy enough to answer her question about how to open it.

His good cheer continued as he handed Holly her three other course books, noticing that she was impressed by the size of her Arithmancy and Ancient Runes volumes. Of course, she had to give a small laugh at one of the books from the Divination table as it featured a black dog that looked very similar to Sirius. The manager called the canine a Grim, mistaking her facial expression for unease. The girl simply shrugged at that and picked up several additional books, including the one on death omens, despite the manager's objections.

Luna, at least, would get a kick out of it.

Holly finished off her shopping with a quick stop at the candy store and the joke shop before heading back to her room. There, Tom transfigured the Animagus back into a regular dog and helped his friend shrink her things and organise her trunk. The rest of the day was spent in relative ease as Holly and Sirius talked and learned about each other with occasional comments from Tom when he wasn't absorbed in one of her new books.

Holly spoke mostly about her time at Hogwarts, a few of her less dangerous escapades, her friends, and being Seeker on the Quidditch team. Sirius, in turn, talked of his own schooldays, telling her about several of the pranks he and his friends had pulled. Altogether, it was a rather nice conversation, though it didn't occur to the girl until much later that she had neglected to mention she was a Slytherin. However, truthfully, the man hadn't asked either.

That evening, they transfigured Sirius a few clothes to go with the shirt and pants Tom had made him the night before to sleep in. They were simple but serviceable and much better than his prison robes.

Further, Holly used her wand to great effect, trimming his hair. It was something she saw as a necessity, especially since he had spent almost an hour attempting to detangle his long mane after his bath. It was now roughly shoulder-length, though it was still a bit greasy and stringy from years of neglect. Sirius himself took care of his beard, now completely clean shaven, and that simple act made him look years younger, much closer to his true age.

The only real problems he had left to deal with were his teeth and supreme thinness. His mouth he would take care of in the morning, and a few weeks of regular meals would cure his emaciation with a little help from a few potions. Regardless, he looked much better than before, and his transformation from half-starved criminal to semi-respectable looking wizard was nothing short of miraculous.

The next day, the three of them were up and about at sunrise. The Zabini's were supposed to arrive at eight, and Holly could barely contain herself. While she had missed all the members of the family, it was Blaise that she longed to see the most. He was her best friend, so it was understandable that she would miss him greatly. Still, it almost felt like there was more to it than that. She missed Luna, Draco, and all the others, but not the way she missed Blaise. And she couldn't quite figure out what was different.

Shaking her head at that, she set about getting rid of the extra bed Tom had made for Sirius and packing her things, which had mysteriously become scattered about her room the night before. The Slytherin was just about finished with only her Pocket Sneakoscope left, but she couldn't seem to find it anywhere. Already, Holly had already been searching for five minutes, and she knew for a fact that it wasn't in her trunk as Tom had been looking at it the night before. The girl had a sneaking suspicion that he had done so to confirm that Sirius was indeed trustworthy, not that she could really blame him for his scepticism.

Nevertheless, Holly was becoming rather frustrated. In fact, she was on the verge of asking Sirius, who was spelling his teeth back to some semblance of normalcy with her wand, to summon it. The girl

was in the process of doing so, growling to herself and fiercely wishing that she could just find the blasted thing...

When like magic, there it was. The Sneakoscope all but flew out from under the bed, landing neatly in the palm of her hand. Both of the male occupants of the room instantly whirled around, eyes riveting to her and all but demanding an explanation.

However, one wasn't forthcoming.

The unexpected tingling in Holly's brain immediately let her know that her telekinesis was once more making itself known, but she wasn't about to say that. Her magic had settled some directly after the Marge incident, but apparently, it was back in full force now, churning throughout her. Still, she really couldn't say anything about it at the moment as only one of her companions had any idea what was going on. It wasn't that she distrusted Sirius, but her Mind Magic was something very personal that she had only shared with her closest confidants. Plus, she wanted to get to know the man a bit better before she dropped the bombshell.

As such, she merely brushed off the incident, pointedly ignoring the anxious looks she was receiving. Tom picked up on her unspoken message and went back to his book, occasionally glancing at her over the top. Sirius just continued watching for several more moments, a strange and thoughtful expression on his face.

By the time eight rolled around, everything was in order, though there was an edge of tension to the room. Holly was practically dancing from foot to foot, a rather unusual thing for her, as she tried to contain both her magic and her excitement at seeing Blaise again. Nonetheless, she did finally settle down when Tom threatened to force feed her one of the Calming draughts they had brewed earlier in the summer. Putting on her best Slytherin mask, she did the final checks on all her trunk, making sure everything was in place. Sirius was already in miniature form, tucked into a pocket of her robe, and Tom was just about to enter the diary.

Nodding to herself, Holly was all ready to head downstairs when there was a loud knock on the door. Tom instantly disappeared as the girl motioned to him and wandered over to the entrance, wondering

who it could be. She reached out with her mental senses as she opened the door, but the entire exercise became rather moot when she was immediately grabbed, arms circling around her. Surprise surged through her, but she successfully conquered the impulse to struggle as she realised just who her attacker was. Her magic, which had blazed up at her shock, instantly calmed.

“Hi, Blaise,” Holly said, though her voice was rather muffled due to the fact her face was pressed into the boy’s shoulder.

“Holly,” he breathed, squeezing her even tighter. The girl was about to protest, claiming that she needed air, when he pulled back to look at her. “I’m so glad that you’re all right. I was so worried.”

“I’m fine, Blaise. Perfectly fine,” she replied, smiling up at him and belatedly noticing that he had grown over the summer. Holly glanced over to the side, noting the other person there. “Hello, Mr. Zabini... Dante.”

She moved to greet him, but Blaise held her tight.

“Hello, Holly,” the older male returned, beaming at her as she finally extricated herself from Blaise.

But instead of shaking her hand, Dante gave her another embrace. Holly flushed with embarrassment and more than a hint of happiness, but she didn’t have time to do much of anything else as Blaise immediately grabbed her hand and led her back into her room. The door clicked shut behind his father, and her friend led her to the bed, all but pushing her to sit on it and moving down next to her.

“Are you sure that you’re fine, Holly,” the boy inquired with concern, carefully looking her over. “The Auror sent us a message, saying that you had runaway from the Dursleys, and I can’t see you doing that unless something awful happened.”

Holly’s lingering blush turned an even deeper red. “Er... not really. Look, I’ll explain after we leave. I don’t want to repeat myself, and Eren’s sure to ask as well,” she deftly brushed off the rest of the conversation, not really wanting to explain and citing the fact that she’d only have to tell everything again.

The others seemed to accept this, backing off.

Knowing they weren't about to get more out of her, Blaise questioned. "Well, then... are you ready to go, Holly?"

"Yes, we must be going," Dante added, shrinking her trunk and stowing it in his pocket. "Eren's told me that she has exciting news to share, and she wouldn't tell us until you came."

Holly lounged on Blaise's bed that evening. She had been right when she had thought that she would only have to repeat her tell of woe, and the brief respite she been allowed had given her the opportunity to get it straight. She couldn't exactly mention Tom's part in all of it or Sirius', so the girl was forced to abbreviate her story quite a bit. She had basically told them that she'd had an argument with Vernon's sister and that she had left when Marge seemed ready for violence. Tom, the tattletale that he was, had unfortunately told Blaise a more complete version, including the part about her broken wrist.

The only thing he left out was mention of Sirius as Holly didn't feel it was the proper time yet, especially with so many people popping in and out all day. Tom had actually been forced to remain in his diary most of the morning and afternoon since the other members of the family and the house-elves had been around, and he was only now able to come out. Regardless, the two had agreed to tell Blaise the entire story after nightfall when there would be a lower chance of them being overheard.

Aside from the last two points, Holly's day had been hitch free and rather enjoyable, especially with the fact that Eren Zabini had some interesting and exciting news of her own.

"I can't believe your mum is having another baby," Holly said, leaning against the pillows. "And I can't believe she waited until I was there to tell everyone."

Blaise beamed from beside her. "Well, she's sort of like your mum, too, so it's only fair that she announce it when you were here. Though honestly, I can scarcely comprehend it myself."

"It is kind of hard to believe," Tom said from the chair in the corner, his diary nearby just in case someone decided to pop in on them. "Most wizarding families don't have more than three children, if they even get that far to begin with. Truthfully, it isn't that unusual to only have two."

He idly fingered the wand Blaise had found for him, which had once belonged to his grandfather. It wasn't a perfect match, but it was more than acceptable, not to mention that he didn't have any other options.

"I can't really think of anyone with more than that many," the oldest Slytherin added after a second.

"Except the Weasleys," Holly laughed, but then, her face took on a more serious expression.

"Well, they've always been a fertile lot," Blaise put in with a grin of his own. "I think it's part of their family magic."

He continued to smile, only to notice that neither of his friends seemed to be doing the same. Instead, they were exchanging strange looks.

"What?" He eyed both of them. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

"Well," Holly began, turning to him, "not wrong per se."

Her eyes flickered to Tom and then back to the other boy. She took a deep breath before launching into an explanation about their newest addition.

To say that Blaise was shocked was an understatement, but he surprisingly seemed to take the news rather well. All it took was for Holly to say that she believed Sirius' story; her friend trusted her judgement that much. Of course, it was rather hard to lie to someone who read minds, so it was rather understandable.

There was only one part of Holly's story that he really reacted to, except it wasn't anything that had to do with Sirius. When she got to the part about Remus, Blaise violently shuddered, and his thoughts

turned oddly blank. But he quickly shook off their questioning expressions and redirected the conversation back to the Animagus. Holly watched him closely but didn't press, deciding to ask him about it later when they were alone.

"We have to tell my parents," Blaise insisted when she had finally finished. "After we explain, they'll be sure to help us."

Tom frowned, twirling his new wand. "I don't think that is a good idea. How would you explain all this?" He paused, thinking it over. "I can just imagine you trying to tell them during breakfast."

Holly nodded. "It'd probably be something along the lines of: 'I'm so happy you're having a baby, Eren. Isn't it wonderful? Oh, guess what. This is Sirius. **He's an escaped criminal!** And did I mention that he supposedly works for Voldemort? Please pass the toast.'"

"I see your point," Blaise conceded. "But what else did he say? Does he know where Pettigrew is? How did he even escape in the first place?" The boy exhaled slowly. "I mean, Dementors guard Azkaban, and they're supposed to seriously weaken people. That alone should have prevented him from leaving. And for that matter, how did he manage to keep his magic so intact? He's only been out a week or two... at most! Yet, he was recovered enough to cast already."

Holly rubbed her hand over her face. "I'm not sure of the answers to any of those. Sirius hinted that he knows where Pettigrew is, but he won't tell us where," she said, tapping her chin with her index finger. "I tried to read his thoughts, but they were cloudy. I could get enough to know he was telling the truth, but that was about it. Everything else was shielded." She considered the problem.

"Also," Tom picked up the conversation, "he said he would transform in his cell. Dementors don't have the same effect on animals as they do on people. Their abilities are diluted, not as strong, so I suppose as a dog he was protected." He glanced to Holly.

"Apparently, he was visited by Fudge," the girl went on. "I guess you could say that it woke him up, gave him something to focus on... enough drive to escape. Sirius just squeezed through the bars as a

dog and swam to shore.” She shook her head. “But I’m not certain that’s the entire story. It feels like he’s leaving something out.”

“I agree,” Tom inserted, “but there really isn’t much we can do about that now. We’ll just have to watch and see if he’ll let anything slip.”

Blaise said, “Or hope that he’ll eventually tell us.” He sighed. “Where is he now? I suppose that we should turn him back.”

“Here.” Holly reached into her robe pocket, producing the little, black dog. “Tom did an extended transfiguration so that we could leave him like that for a few days if need be,” she informed her year-mate. “Are you sure you want us to change him back?”

Blaise hesitated for a minute. “Yes, if you say he’s trustworthy... then he is. It’s as simple as that.” He frowned unexpectedly.

“What is it?” Tom questioned, stopping just as he was about to cast. “Did you change your mind?”

The other boy shook his head. “No... I had a quick question though.” He rubbed his hand over his cheek.

“Yes?” Holly asked.

Her friend pinched the bridge of his nose. “Well... what are we going to tell Draco and Luna?”

Semper Fidelius: Always Faithful, Always True

AN: Okay, boys and girls, I need a name for Blaise’s new brother/sister. I won’t tell you what gender as I am not really sure myself yet. I’m willing to be swayed either way since my muse is feeling rather fickle lately, though I’m leaning more towards one than the other. Yes, the baby is a plot point for this story and is actually somewhat important.

Also, things will start to pick up next chapter... finally. They should make it all the way through the summer and back to school. Oh, I know their reactions to Remus are a bit peculiar, but I think they fit

with the characters. Tom and Holly are both Mind Mages, so they will tend not to be as prejudiced against others. There is a specific reason for Blaise's reaction, which will come into play later on.

Finally, I only have the American version of the books, so I had to do the miles to kilometres conversion by hand. I apologise if it isn't exactly correct.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Special thanks to Our Catholic Faith (online) for the Latin translation.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Draco Demented

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Draco Demented

The rest of the summer passed in a blur, and it was interspersed by the slight but still continuing tension between Tom and Sirius. While it was all but unnoticeable for the most part, it did flare up at odd times. Blaise, on the other hand, was friendly to the newcomer, finding him to be a rather interesting individual. The caramel-skinned boy spent a surprising amount of time with Sirius, peppering him with questions about the Transfiguration behind becoming an Animagus and how he had managed to do it without getting caught.

During that time, Holly noticed that her Mind Magic settled, going back to how it had been at the end of the previous school term. She was no longer plagued by strange bouts of telekinesis, a godsend since they hadn't mentioned anything about that to Sirius yet. Still, the change puzzled her greatly as had the problem itself. Blaise's collection of books relating to the subject was severely limited, which is to say that they only went into the basics and didn't go far beyond that. Tom had simply shaken his head when she asked him about it, but he did mention that the same thing used to happen to him during the summer months, though he had never really figured out why. He had several hypotheses about the problem but no real answers, so Holly made a mental note to ask Luna when she returned to school. Perhaps her fellow Mind Mage knew something.

It was also during those three weeks that Sirius further recovered from his stint in Azkaban. He was looking much better now, no longer resembling a skeleton that was trying to masquerade as a wizard, which was probably due to all the food they filched for him from the kitchen. He spent most of the day outside, away from the manor, rebuilding the muscle he had lost. This had the added advantage of keeping him away from the other members of the family, house-elves included, though it did take him from the Slytherins as well. There was only so much time they could spend outside without Dante and Eren becoming suspicious, especially since they knew how fond the children were of the library. That wasn't even mentioning the fact that Blaise didn't play Quidditch, so they couldn't use that as an excuse. Plus, the youngest Zabinis had taken to following Holly around during the day, and she would be hard pressed to explain a large, black dog.

Truthfully, the only time Holly really saw Sirius was at night, but even then, they had to be careful. They did talk some, but their discussions mostly revolved around Lily and James Potter, Sirius' schooldays, and after he had graduated. The girl noticed that he didn't mention his life before Hogwarts, except rarely and only in passing, but she didn't press, sensing it was a sensitive subject. All after, she knew what it was to have an unhappy childhood, and she could generally recognise that sign in others.

For her part, Holly left out all mention of her time at the Dursleys, which only left her two years at Hogwarts. However, there were problems with this as well. Her first year basically involved trying to protect the Philosopher's Stone from Voldemort, while her second centred on the whole Heir of Slytherin debacle. Neither were topics she really wanted to discuss, mostly due to the fact that would bring her dangerously close to revealing Tom's true nature. Still, a not-so-small part of her didn't want Sirius to think her life, and her by proxy, as abnormal. She knew it was silly and just a habit ingrained from the Dursleys, but regardless, she didn't want to disappoint the first adult who had ever taken such a personal interest in her life without her having to befriend their children first.

Basically, this all translated to mean that Holly glossed over most of her own life and focused on Sirius'. She spoke of her friends and her position as Seeker on the Quidditch team but didn't go far beyond that. It wasn't until she laid down to sleep the night before the train ride back to school that she even realised she still hadn't told him what House she was in.

September 1st dawned surprisingly bright and clear, a marked change from the rainy days previous. They arrived at the station without incident and in good time, though it seemed that everyone else had gotten there even earlier. The platform was packed with people, mostly nervous parents, who had already shooed their children onto the train.

Holly was willing to bet ten Galleons that she knew exactly what they were worried about. The dangerous Sirius Black was on the loose, after all.

The train itself was complete pandemonium, and Holly and Blaise had to battle every step of the way just to get down the hallway. They finally managed to find their year-mates in the direct centre of the train, but their compartment was completely full. Quite dejected, the two left with Draco in tow. They had no idea where Luna was, but chances were that she would find them on her own, so they wandered down further, finally finding a compartment that had only one person in it.

The slumbering man inside was thin and in patched robes with greying brown hair. His head was turned away, but Holly still thought he looked vaguely familiar. It wasn't until a minute later, when they were already inside, that it hit her.

It was Remus Lupin, and he appeared to be drooling in his sleep.

Holly wondered what by Salazar he was doing there, on the train to Hogwarts, but then, she vaguely remembered him mentioning a surprise in several of his letters. It had slipped her mind with all the Sirius business, but now, she distinctly recalled the veiled hints. From there, her mind jumped to a logic reason for his presence, and seeing the name stamped on his travel case, Holly knew she had guessed correctly.

Remus was the new Defence professor, and he was probably on the train to protect the students from Sirius Black.

She started and blinked for several seconds after coming to that conclusion, which caused her friends to look at her curiously. Nevertheless, Draco nodded in understanding after a quiet but quick explanation.

Blaise, on the other hand, immediately tensed and backed away. He stopped after Holly shot him a glare, knowing that he really didn't have anywhere else to go. But he made a pointed gesture to Holly's pocket where Tom was safely tucked away before his eyes flickered to the animal basket in his hand. She got his message, but there wasn't really all that much she could do.

Everywhere else was full. They had to sit here.

And it was at that moment that Holly wondered if Fate really did have it in for her. Trust her luck that when she was trying to smuggle an escaped criminal to Hogwarts in the guise of a rather cute kitten, the one person who could identify him was present. Still, she couldn't help but chuckle at the irony of it all, wondering how Sirius would have taken the situation if he was conscious.

Currently, he was spelled asleep since he hadn't exactly been thrilled by the prospect of a six hour journey in a basket, transfigured into a cat no less. He had originally wanted to come as a dog or even a puppy, but Tom had immediately shot down that idea by pointing out that neither was allowed. Further, they couldn't risk turning him into an inanimate object again, something quite dangerous if they continued to do it for extended periods of time. Besides, bringing a black cat wouldn't draw much untoward attention, and who would ever suspect a kitten of being dangerous?

Sirius hadn't been pleased by this, but he had eventually acquiesced, even helping come up with a cover story for his sudden appearance. If anyone asked, he was the replacement for Mr. Momo, Blaise's real cat who had sadly died at the end of June. It was a sound plan and seemed to have worked so far. Plus, it had the added benefits of allowing Sirius free access to their dorm and providing further protection in case Remus had told someone of his former friend's Animagus abilities.

The only inherent draw back was that Sirius couldn't change forms himself while he was under another Transfiguration, so he had to rely on others to do it for him. They had several ideas on how to circumvent that little annoyance, but they wouldn't be able to try anything until they got to Hogwarts and a better Potions lab.

Despite all that, Holly was a bit hesitant to take a seat, especially when she remembered that werewolves were supposed to have a very advanced sense of smell. Thankfully, there were enough strange scents around to cover Sirius', but there was still a chance he would be recognised. On the other hand, she didn't really have much of a choice.

Everywhere else was full. They sat here, in the corridor, or found separate places elsewhere.

Reluctantly, she shuffled the rest of the way in, the two boys following behind and staying as close to the door. It was the farthest they could get from Remus, who was propped up against one of the windows, and still be in the same compartment. Blaise was visibly unhappy with their choice, his mind very agitated, but he kept his mouth shut. And unfortunately for him, Draco nipped in the seat next to Holly, which meant that he either had to sit across from Remus or on the same side. Frowning mightily, the brown-eyed boy lowered himself next to the entrance. He deliberately didn't look at the lone adult and busied himself with making sure the door was unlocked so that Luna could join them later on.

A fact that the three of them would soon come to regret.

It wasn't more than a minute after they had gotten themselves situated when the only girl felt a tingle of forewarning shoot down her spine. Unexpectedly, the door slid open, and bushy head popped in.

"Oh, there's room here."

Holly had to bite her lip to keep from groaning, and she mentally berated herself for becoming so distracted that she hadn't realised they were there sooner. She turned annoyed eyes to her friends, who were looking rather exasperated themselves.

Without warning or so much as a by your leave, Hermione Granger shoved the door the rest of the way open and stepped in. She immediately descended on the empty space next to Blaise after hastily hefting her trunk out of the way.

"Hello, everyone. Holly, Blaise." She nodded to both of them, adding an instant later, "Draco."

Before anyone could comment another person appeared in the doorway, and like his Housemate, he simply barged in without invitation. Yet, unlike Hermione, Ron Weasley merely grunted in greeting. He growled at his trunk as he lifted it, nearly clipping Draco in the head. The redhead paused in taking a seat once he was

finished since his only options were to either fit in the space between Hermione and the sleeping Remus or to sit on the other side of his most hated Slytherin. Even with only those choices, he continued to stand for another moment, trying to decide. Finally, right about the time his fellow Gryffindor opened her mouth to berate him, he reluctantly moved next to the blond, pushing himself against the wall and as far away from the other boy as he could get.

Afterwards, they sat in a rather awkward silence. The Slytherins couldn't talk amongst themselves with conscious witnesses. Truthfully, it wasn't like that they would have said anything important with another person there, even if he was unaware. Additionally, Holly wasn't really in the mood to chat with the Gryffindors due to their actions the previous school year, and it seemed that they didn't really know what to say to her either.

Taking a deep breath, the Slytherin girl secretly wished she had a book on hand so that she could read instead of just sitting there. Nevertheless, it would be rude to fetch one from her trunk, and Hermione would be sure to call her on her lack of manners, despite the fact that the bushy-haired girl was known for doing the exact same thing. Holly would just have to tough it out, and a single discreet glance at her Housemates let the girl know they were feeling much the same.

A sudden noise across from her caught Holly's attention, dragging her from her musings. She looked up to find Hermione fiddling with the straps on an enormous cat basket.

"Don't let that thing out!" Ron stated loudly, causing Remus to stir.

The redhead instantly shut his mouth, flushing. The three Serpents blinked but didn't say anything. Hermione merely ignored him, still loosening the straps. Blaise reached over to help her, though it was more out of a desire to see inside than to actually be nice.

"I see that you have a new pet," the boy commented, trying to start up a conversation.

“Oh, yes,” the Gryffindor gushed, finally taking the lid off. She lifted out a large, ginger-coloured ball of fur, wrapping her arms around it tightly and holding it out to the three Slytherins for inspection.

“He’s gorgeous, isn’t he?”

Blaise’s eyebrows rose until they were nearly even with his hairline, and he made a neutral sound. Draco started to laugh but thankfully turned it into a rather believable cough. Holly discreetly elbowed him in the side, though she couldn’t help but agree with his assessment.

The thing before them had to be the ugliest creature she had ever seen, including Dudley Dursley. The “cat”, though she shuddered to even mentally call it that, had impossibly thick fur, which stuck up in all directions. Conversely, its tail was pencil thin, despite the rest of its body, and wiggled around like it had a mind of its own. The creature was bowlegged to the point that she couldn’t fathom how it could possibly walk, and its very grumpy face was completely squashed in, making it look like it had run repeatedly into a brick wall.

“What type of... cat is that?” Holly asked, almost stumbling over her word choice.

Hermione shrugged, rubbing the thing’s belly. “I’m not sure. The store manager only said that he’d been in there for ages.” She turned the animal around in her arms, rubbing her face against its own. “I can’t imagine why, though. Crookshanks is such a sweet baby.”

Ron made a gagging sound, Draco faintly echoing it.

“Sweet? Hermione, that thing nearly scalped me. It’s not a cat; it’s a small tiger! And don’t let it around Scabbers anymore.” He turned to Holly, pointedly ignoring the blond between them. “The bloody thing has it in for him.”

The bushy-haired girl humphed, turning away and noting the other basket that was between Blaise and her.

“Aren’t you going to let out your cat, Blaise?” she questioned, petting the monstrosity’s head again.

“Er... no, he’s been a bit under the weather lately,” the boy said smoothly. “I best not chance it.”

She leaned forward and peeped inside, nearly squashing her own pet in the process. “This isn’t the same one you had before,” Hermione commented, looking at it more closely. “Oh, it’s only a kitten, but he’s sleeping. Look, Crookshanks. Isn’t he beautiful... although not as beautiful as you,” she added, holding him up so that he could see inside.

Crookshanks growled, and Hermione merely shrugged before clutching him tighter to her chest. Her eyes roved around the compartment, landing on the man sitting just down from her. Ron followed her gaze, but unlike his friend, his eyes didn’t flicker to the name on the travelling case.

“Who d’you reckon he is?” the redhead asked, jerking his head toward Remus like they didn’t know who he was talking about.

“Professor Lupin. He’s the new Defence professor,” Holly answered, trying to keep her obvious relief from her voice.

She was glad that they were no longer curious about Sirius, but she was still uneasy about their interest in Remus, especially since they might recall she had a pen friend by that name. Still, the less attention the two nosy Gryffindors paid to little “Snuffles” the better.

Ron inclined his head, thinking it over. “I guess.” He nodded to himself, deciding to change the topic. “So how was your summer, Holly?” he asked, almost kicking Draco in the shin when he moved his leg.

Only the other boy’s quick reflexes saved him.

“I tried to call you on the fellytone,” Ron went on, completely oblivious to the dark look the blond shot him or perhaps just ignoring it. “But I must have gotten the wrong number. Some bloke answered, and he was right pissed. Screamed that he didn’t know you.”

Holly had to fight to keep the grimace off her face, remembering a call she had received a week into break. She had been in the kitchen at

the time and hadn't been able to make out any words, but she had still been close enough to hear whoever it was screaming over line from the other room. The girl had figured it must have been for her, though she couldn't imagine who it could possibly be, when Vernon had slammed the phone down. He had then stormed up to her, screaming himself hoarse and raging about freaks the entire time.

In any case, she did briefly wonder where Ron had found her number but figured he must have gotten it from Hermione, who had had it since first year. Not that the other girl had ever called her or anything.

Holly's entire recollection only took a moment, but Hermione interrupted before the Slytherin could even begin to fashion a reply.

"Honestly, Ron." She shook her bushy-head so furiously that her cat actually hissed. "It's a telephone."

Somehow, Ron managed to bite back a retort, and the conversation lulled.

Instead, the redhead seemed to take out his frustrations by glowering at Draco, twitching his foot toward the other boy's ankle sharply. The Slytherin shifted out of the way, practically sitting on Holly to avoid being hit. Hermione, in turn, twitched nervously, petting the now dozing Crookshanks. The Serpents merely exchanged glances.

"So..." Holly began, trying to distract the redhead. "Where's Neville?"

Ron frowned, looking away from the blond. "Not sure. We got separated earlier. One minute, he was behind us on the platform. The next, he was nowhere in sight." He moved his foot again, almost kicking Draco for a third time.

"And you just left him behind," the blond put in with a condescending tone. "How considerate of you." He had a very malicious gleam in his eyes, and Holly had the distinct feeling that he was out for trouble.

Hermione sniffed. "We didn't leave him behind. The train was about to leave. We had to get on."

“Even better,” the blond stated sarcastically, gesturing for emphasis, “you abandoned him at the station, didn’t even make sure he was on the train.” He paused for a moment, something flashing across his face as a sudden idea occurred to him. “Now, he’s all alone in London, stranded without a single friend to guide him, deserted by those he trusts.”

Blaise snorted, but Draco ignored him. Holly could feel his desire to antagonise the Gryffindors, Weasley in particular, but she couldn’t find it within herself to make him stop.

“We didn’t desert--” Ron furiously tried to interrupt, sitting up sharply, but the blond had built up steam now and refused to be headed off.

“He’s probably wandering around Kings Cross as we speak,” Draco went on dramatically, adopting a sad expression. “He’s wasting away with worry, wondering where everyone has gone. But his friends left him in his moment of need--”

“We didn’t leave him!” Weasley all but shouted, his face reddening and making him look like a tomato with a sunburn.

Across from him, Remus mumbled in his sleep, causing the Gryffindor to instantly silence, though he still shot daggers at his seatmate.

“Poor, poor Neville,” Draco clucked. “Lost and alone. Whatever will he do?” His grey eyes flashed nastily. “And with Sirius Black on the loose no less.”

Ron gaped at him with his mouth hanging open, but he couldn’t think of anything say. Hermione paled dramatically, her lip trembling. Both couldn’t quite hide the guilty expressions on their faces. Holly and Blaise froze for an instant, but they managed to cover it up, adopting blank looks.

Draco seemed satisfied, nodding to himself. His mission was accomplished. The Gryffindors were now silenced.

The conversation was effectively dead after that, and this time, nobody attempted to revive it. Minutes passed in silence. Hermione

eventually produced a book and buried her head in it. Ron scooted as close to the window as he could, practically hugging the glass as he looked out at the ever darkening sky. Crookshanks abandoned his witch a few moments later and settled near Weasley's feet, which only seemed to annoy him, but it did have the benefit of keeping him from kicking at Draco. The three Slytherins didn't really have much to do, so they eventually settled for taking turns with Blaise's chess set. They would have played Exploding Snap, but it was often loud and might wake up Remus.

The lunch trolley came and went, and everyone ate in relative silence. Hermione momentarily attempted to wake up their slumbering companion, who looked like he could use a good meal or three, but her tries were in vain. He simply slept on, his mouth still open.

Hours went by with no sign of Luna or Neville, for that matter. The former concerned the Slytherins somewhat until Holly reached out with her mind and located the second-year, who was with their other friends. The green-eyed girl eventually broke down and also found Neville, though it took her longer to do so. He was with Ginny and a few other Lions, apparently having made the train, despite being left behind.

Still, Holly could hardly tell Ron and Hermione this, and a small, vindictive part of her thought their worry served them right.

The day progressively darkened as they went, rain beginning to fall, and not long before the normal time they should be at Hogwarts, the train began to slow. Ron perked up at this, thinking they had finally arrived. The rest of his companions weren't so sure.

Draco lit his wand and attempted to peek out the window to see why they were slowing, but the rain beat against the glass too heavily for him to make out much of anything.

The train stopped with a jerk, accompanied by the sound of various pieces of luggage being strewn about. The lights flickered once and died, and a pitiful mew came from Snuffles' basket.

Ron took over looking out the window, all but shoving Draco away. The redhead stuck his nose to the glass, muttering something about

people moving around outside and coming aboard. But that didn't really make much sense, and everyone exchanged confused looks in the semi-darkness.

It was about this point that Holly became aware of a myriad of presences outside, but they weren't like anything she had ever felt before. They were misty, hard to hold onto... like they were trying to float away, and even when she dropped most of her mental shielding to get a better feel for them, she still couldn't really keep track.

The girl stood and moved to the other side of the compartment, gazing beyond Remus, who she belatedly realised was now awake and only pretending to be asleep. She wanted to see the things that she was feeling, needing to put a face to them. But a sudden flash in her mind caused her to hesitate. She whirled around, wand now in hand, and faced the door.

Remus chose that moment to make himself known, startling the other people in the compartment when he created a silvery, hand-held fire to light the area. His tired eyes flickered about, looking at each of them and lingering on Holly the longest. Yet, he didn't say anything to her personally, only telling the lot of them to stay put.

He headed for exit, but it opened before he even got there.

A cloaked figure was in the doorway blocking his path. Holly saw a greyish, almost decayed hand on the side, but it immediately disappeared within the sleeves of its cloak. Whoever it was took a deep, shuddering breath...

And then, all Holly knew was that she heard screaming.

The girl heard it everywhere, all around her, coming from every direction. There was a torrent of voices in her mind, each one shrieking. She felt emotions that she knew weren't hers, couldn't possibly be hers, but they felt so real. And there were people in her mind, dozens... hundreds. She recognised some of them, but they were weighed down by the others.

But soon, one seemed louder than the others, closer to her, and she started when she realised it was Draco. Holly latched onto his presence, pulling herself to him.

There was a flash of a tall man with white-blond hair, and he was covered in blood. He was face down on the marble floor, his neck at an odd angle, and there were long gashes all over his back and arms. She heard a choked sob that sounded like it came from a small child, high-pitched but soft. In her mind's eye, Holly saw little hands reach out and struggle to turn the man over before cupping his face.

He looked like Lucius Malfoy but wasn't him. His dead eyes were the wrong colour. They weren't grey, but rather a light, frosty green.

And just like that, the image was slipping away, replaced by even more shrieking. Holly finally managed to raise her mental defences, but all she really succeeded in doing was filtering out most of them until only one remained.

It was a woman's voice, sharp and clear, filled with determination. She was begging, pleading with someone, but Holly couldn't make out the words. A second later, the woman was screaming again.

Holly instantly threw up her strongest shielding, putting every part of her mind behind it, and then... there was blessed silence.

She opened her eyes, which she hadn't remembered shutting, only to gaze up into the worried face of Blaise. He looked pale in the light of the relit lamps but seemed to be fine otherwise.

"Holly?" he breathed. "Are you--"

"I'm fine," she responded before he could really even complete his question. "Really," she added at his disbelieving expression. "What happened?"

But it was Ron who answered.

"Don't know. That thing came in. And then, you started shaking. If Blaise hadn't caught you, you would have fell."

Holly noticed that he didn't mention anyone screaming, but she didn't dare ask. She glanced across the compartment, seeing Draco staring back at her. He was completely white, trembling faintly. His grey eyes were impossibly large and dilated, just a ring of silver around the black.

"What was that thing?" Hermione questioned, breathing harshly. She turned to the professor, the movement of the train causing the lamps to cast shadows on her face.

"A Dementor, one of the guards of Azkaban," Remus replied, reaching into his pocket. "Here. Eat this." He produced an incredibly large slab of chocolate and broke off several pieces, handing them out and giving the largest to Holly and Draco respectively. "Excuse me while I go talk to the driver."

The professor left, and Ron took it as his responsibility to quickly fill in what else had happened, while Holly munched on her chocolate. Apparently, Remus had ordered the Dementor to leave, and when it wouldn't, he shot some kind of silvery light at it, driving it away. The redhead went on to mention that only she and Malfoy had really had a reaction to the thing, although the last name was added with a fair bit of contempt.

But Draco didn't even have it in him to retort, merely shaking and numbly gazing at the wall.

It came to Blaise to defend his Housemate, and he did so with a fair amount of sarcasm. Holly barely registered what he said as she was too occupied with pulling the still sleeping Snuffles from his basket and running her hands through his dark fur as she checked him over. He mewed very softly, twitching in his sleep but appeared fine, and Blaise gently took the kitten from her before she could tuck him back inside his carrier.

Thankfully, Remus returned in short order, informing them that they would be at their destination in ten minutes. His gaze lingered on Holly, and he didn't look away until she gave him a barely perceptible nod. Still, his eyes did to flicker back to her every few seconds.

When the train finally pulled into the station, there was a rush to get off. Ron and Hermione shot of the compartment like Voldemort himself was on their tails. Holly, however, hung behind, waving Blaise and a still dazed Draco along and telling them to save her a seat on the carriage. The dark-eyed boy seemed distinctly unhappy with this but eventually did as she asked.

Soon, only Holly and Remus remained, and they stood in an awkward sort of silence, appraising each other. Truthfully, it was to be expected because, for all of their letters, they had basically only met once... and that had been over two years previous.

A full minute passed in silence, and they continued studying each other. Holly really hadn't gotten a good look at him before since he had been turned away from her most of the trip, and she couldn't help but notice several differences from what she recalled. His hair was greyer now, especially near his temples, and he looked a great deal more worn. His face was tired, weary despite the smile present, and his robes had definitely seen better days.

"It's good to see you, Holly" he finally said, interrupting her inspection. He gazed down at her fondly, something nameless passing across his face.

"You, too, R-Professor" the Slytherin responded, actually managing to smile at him.

He chuckled at her word choice but didn't correct it, merely continuing to look at her.

Another minute passed quietly.

"Are you all right?" the man inquired as he saw her eyes drift closed and her face tighten. "You did take a nasty turn earlier?"

She made a neutral sound. "I'm much better now," the girl replied honestly enough, not mentioning how tired she suddenly felt.

More silence.

Holly exhaled, trying to brighten up. "Well, I guess I should be going now."

"Yes, you probably should. You don't want to miss the carriages."

The girl nodded and was about to step away, but she hesitated. She didn't know what came over her then, but the next thing the Slytherin knew, her arms were wrapped around his middle in a tight hug. It ended a few heartbeats later before he could even react, but it was still enough to give him a very bemused expression as he watched her depart.

The third-year hurried to her friends' carriage, finding it with ease. She wasn't really shocked to see Luna inside, greeting her friend with as much happiness as she could muster under the circumstances. The Ravenclaw seemed to understand perfectly, not taking offence in the slightest, merely content to hum to herself as they were taken to Hogwarts.

On the other hand, Holly was surprised to discover that the fourth person in the carriage was not Draco, but rather a fifth-year Hufflepuff. The older girl was wedged in next to Blaise, and she was looking strangely at him. Or more specifically the black ball of fluff in his arms. Luna, too, seemed interested, clearly wondering why he had brought the cat with him.

The boy merely shrugged when asked, trying to appear nonchalant, telling them that his poor Snuffles was sick and shouldn't be left alone. His eyes flickered to Holly when he said this, and she caught his unspoken words, though she seemed to be the only one. Blaise hadn't left Sirius in case the Dementors came back.

Soon enough, they were in the castle, eager to move into the Great Hall. However, McGonagall put a damper on those plans when she called Holly, Hermione, and Draco over and took them to her office. There, Madam Pomfrey fussed over the two Slytherins for several moments, mumbling about their delicate state. The witch insisted that they spend the night in the Hospital Wing, but she was finally dissuaded from that idea after receiving two very Snape-like glares.

Afterwards, Draco was told to wait out in the hall, while the Transfiguration professor presented the two girls each with their very own hourglass. It took a moment for Holly to realise what they were.

Time Turners.

Several minutes later, a very satisfied Holly sauntered into the corridor, her tiredness momentarily forgotten. Draco joined her on the trek down to the Great Hall, watching him curiously. She noticed that he was still just as pale as he had been on the train, but he shook off her interest, redirecting it by asking what McGonagall had wanted. The girl merely replied that she had worked out the complications in her schedule, smirking faintly the entire time.

It took him a second, but he caught on, barely resisting the urge to laugh out loud. Their little scheme had worked. Now, they just had to tell their fellow conspirators.

The two made it to the Great Hall and sat in the space between Blaise and Milli. The heavy-set girl was holding Snuffles, apparently having stolen him away, while a nearby Pansy scratched under his chin. Holly frowned when she noticed that the kitten's eyes were open and groggily staring at her, as if confused about where he was. She shot a questioning look to Blaise, who leaned forward and whispered that the Sleeping spell had only just worn off. They had timed it so Sirius would wake up just after the feast, but the delay with the Dementors had thrown off their schedule. Still, as long as he remembered himself and behaved, there wouldn't be a problem.

A moment later, Dumbledore stood up to make his year speech, and Holly belatedly realised that they had missed the Sorting. It was too late to worry about it now, but she did wonder who had called the role in McGonagall's place.

Her earlier guess was soon proven correct when Remus was introduced as the new Defence professor. Yet, he didn't really seem to inspire many people with his appearance, especially with his patched robes. So it came as no surprise that he initially received only a disheartened applause, most it from the people from the train compartment. Nevertheless, the rest of Slytherin did join in when they

saw their three Housemates clapping so enthusiastically, assuming that the third-years knew something they didn't.

The headmaster's next announcement received far more attention than the last, though it really was not all that surprising since it wasn't everyday a teacher retired. Further, there had been numerous wagers placed on how much longer Kettleburn would last, and while Holly wasn't involved with the betting, she couldn't help the trill of unease that shot through her, bubbling in her stomach. Hagrid was a nice person, but he probably wouldn't make a good professor, even in a subject like Care of Magical Creatures. After all, he did think that dragons and three-headed dogs made excellent pets. She could only imagine what kind of monstrosities he would actually try to teach about.

Afterwards, when the clapping had finally died down, the Head Boy and Girl were introduced. Holly was surprised to learn that Percy had won the position, a fact Ron had failed to mention.

By this point, a fair number of the students were shifting in their seats quite ready for the feast to be served. However, Dumbledore disappointed them, choosing to make one final announcement.

The old man's face unexpectedly turned grave, his eyes losing some of their customary twinkle as they swept around the room.

"As you will all be aware after their search of the Hogwarts Express, our school is presently playing host to some of the Dementors of Azkaban, who are here on Ministry of Magic business." Dumbledore paused for a moment, his gaze roving around before adding, "They are stationed at every entrance to the grounds, and while they are with us, I must make it plain that nobody is to leave school without permission. Dementors are not to be fooled by tricks or disguises – or even Invisibility Cloaks." Holly's eyes widened momentarily at that implication. "It is not in the nature of a Dementor to understand pleading or excuses. I therefore warn each and every one of you to give them no reason to harm you."

He looked at the students for a moment longer, and Holly had the distinct impression that Dumbledore was not the least bit pleased with

this arrangement. Yet, the appearance of the feast soon distracted her, and she tucked in gratefully.

Unfortunately, a few minutes into the meal, Holly found that she couldn't eat anymore, in spite of her barely touched plate. Her stomach was churning, making her queasy, and only some of it was due to the fact that Milli still hadn't put Sirius down. The other girl was cuddling him to her chest, stroking his little head and chatting with Pansy. She hadn't even started to eat herself, and it took a moment for Holly to come to the conclusion that she was waiting for her companion to finish so they could switch roles.

Sirius, in turn, was just taking it all in without apparent objection. In fact, his silver-blue eyes were half-shut. The visible part was glazed over as he hadn't fully recovered from the magically induced slumber. However, he was awake enough to take the piece of meat Theo offered him, and he actually gave a little purr of contentment.

Holly managed a faint smile at this and made a mental note to tease him about it later when he was conscious enough to be embarrassed, but another twist of her belly soon distracted her. It took her a moment to calm her stomach, and midway through, Blaise's hand found hers under the table. He gave a fierce squeeze, letting her know that he sensed something was wrong but that he wasn't going to draw attention by asking out loud. She merely shook her head in reply and looked away.

Next to her, she noticed that Draco had also pushed away his plate, his face still unusually pale. His dull gaze met hers, and shiver went up her spine in memory of what she had seen earlier. Holly knew that it had to be one of his memories, but she had no idea where it took place or even how old he had been at the time.

Regardless, if the clues were anything to go by, he had been quite young, and the man had clearly been a relative, someone Draco had cared for. She wanted to ask him about it but didn't dare do it until they were alone. Honestly, she wasn't even sure how to broach the subject.

"So what's its name?" Milli asked suddenly, interrupting her thoughts.

When Holly blinked in confusion, she pointed to the kitten that was now with Pansy.

“Oh... Snuffles,” Holly replied, feeling her belly coil, though with nervousness this time. She fought the urge to fidget and shift in her seat, watching Milli take a bite of potato and idly hoping that she had remembered to magic her hands clean.

“Snuffles?” Pansy repeated from the heavy-set girl’s other side. “That’s an unusual name.”

“More of a dog’s name really,” Gavin, who was across from them, put in with agreement.

“My sisters named him,” Blaise said, managing to keep a straight face. “You know how they are. They come up with the craziest names. Remember that owl we used to have--”

“You mean,” Draco interrupted, his face brightening for an instant, “Gracefully Flies by the Pretty Trees and--”

“Yes, yes... that’s the one,” Blaise cut in, preventing his friend from saying the rest of the ridiculously long name his little sisters had come up with.

Blond’s lips twisted into a smirk, but both it and his face soon faltered. “Wait. Didn’t your cousin accidentally hex her to death?”

The caramel-skinned boy sighed heavily. “Yes... and she was such a good owl.”

The other Slytherins exchanged glances, but they mercifully remained silent. The conversation drifted afterwards, moving on to how everyone’s summer had been. This wasn’t exactly Holly’s favourite topic either, but at least, it was better than the previous one. She deftly avoided most discussion of her holiday, only mentioning that she had again spent it with Blaise. Her fellow Serpents were on to her tricks, however, apparently remembering the summer between first and second year. They spent the rest of the meal peppering her with all sorts of questions, waiting for her to let something slip.

By the end of the feast, Holly finally managed to get them to stop, mostly by refusing to say anything. She was very tired, her stomach ached, and her head was beginning to throb. She wouldn't really feel like answering on her best day, and she most definitely wasn't up to it now. As such, the girl graciously thanked the Maker when Dumbledore dismissed them.

But her luck seemed to be in top form today as she ended up walking with Milli and Pansy to dungeons, Blaise and Draco just in front of her. Her roommates were just as enthralled with Snuffles as they had been at dinner, practically fawning over him. They were now taking turn talking to the kitten, sounding much like Hermione had with Crookshanks. Holly tuned the pair of them out and followed Draco down the corridor, idly staring at the back of his head and allowing her mind to wander.

It drifted back to the blond's memory and from there to the woman's scream she had heard afterwards. The lady sounded familiar... so very familiar, but Holly just couldn't seem to place her. The girl knew that she had heard that voice before; she just couldn't remember where. It brought to mind comfort and happiness, though she really couldn't think of why.

And it was a riddle that would probably eat at her for the next several days and weeks until she figured it out. Even just thinking of it made her temples throb harder.

"Oh, I forgot to ask earlier." Milli's voice cut into her thoughts once again, managing to speak loudly enough to gain the attention of everyone around them.

Holly turned tired green eyes to her year-mate, feeling queasy and wishing nothing more than to drop into her bed and sleep. Despite all that, she gestured for the other girl to continue.

"Is Snuffles a girl or boy?" Milli inquired, stroking the kitten under the chin delicately as she walked down the corridor.

Holly blinked, her mind trying to process the question, but before she could answer, the heavy-set Slytherin rolled her eyes and hoisted him in the air, looking underneath.

“Definitely a boy.”

Snuffles mewed pitifully. The students around them sniggered. Blaise ran his hands over his face.

Holly didn’t know whether she should laugh or cry.

AN: Okay, this came off a bit sillier than I intended, but well... that can’t really be helped. Also, it’s a magic train, so I’m going under the assumption that eight people can fit in a compartment. I know that Hermione is acting rather odd in this chapter, but some people get really peculiar about their pets. The same goes for Milli and Pansy, even if it isn’t their cat. Additionally, Remus sent word about Draco because he saw his reaction, whereas he didn’t in canon.

Oh, I’ve had a lot of people ask about the pairings, and I really don’t have an answer to that. When I started this story, I had one in mind for Holly, but I’m not so sure about it now. Another character has made himself known, and now, I can’t decide who would be best for her. Truthfully, I might have her date around some before she settles on one person, but then again, I might not. It just depends on how the story evolves.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Talons, Tealeaves, and Time Turners

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Talons, Tealeaves, and Timer Turners

Holly's eyes popped open the next morning at exactly six, but it took a few seconds for her mind to catch up with the rest of her. She rolled over, groaning to herself as it did, and her face heated with sympathetic embarrassment. Sirius had been mortified because of Millicent's stunt, but it wasn't like the other girl had known that she was really handling a human. Still, Holly couldn't help but feel a pang of pity when she recalled the night before.

They hadn't been able to change Sirius back when they had been telling Luna and Draco everything that had happened during the summer. However, she hoped that Tom and Blaise had had the opportunity later on while the other boys were asleep. Perhaps Draco had even stayed up with them. After all, the escaped prisoner was his cousin, albeit a very distant one.

Everyone had been surprised by that little revelation, something Sirius had obviously not realised earlier. No one really blamed him, not after meeting the Dementors personally, and considering the fact that he had been in Azkaban for almost twelve years, a few memory gaps were to be expected.

That thought crossing her mind, the girl sighed and sat up. She glanced to the wall across from her, seeing Luna sound asleep in the bed there. Holly had no idea how the house-elves had known the Ravenclaw wanted to stay with them last night, but somehow, they had. The Slytherin had a sneaking suspicion that Luna had told Professor Flitwick and that he had arranged it. Nevertheless, the bed had already been there, just waiting for her, when the two of them had arrived. It was rather nice, and it had meant that Luna hadn't been forced to either share a bed or walk all the way back to her House's dorms.

Chuckling softly at the fact that Luna was drooling in her sleep, Holly rose. She washed and dressed quickly, gathering all that she would need for the day. Her Time Turner was tucked underneath both her robe and her shirt, and it almost seemed to be burning a hole in her skin. As she tucked her books into her bag, she wondered when she would have to use it.

McGonagall had mentioned that she would need to do so only twice a week, and the Transfiguration professor had ordered her to make sure she didn't use it anymore than that. However, Holly had other plans.

With four classes, she would be stretched for time just doing her homework, so the Slytherin definitely intended to fix that problem. Then, there was the fact that she would probably require more sleep to make up for all her extra hours, and that wasn't even mentioning all the additional projects she had in mind. Of course, that also didn't include the times her friends would undoubtedly borrow it.

The Slytherin considered that for a moment before finally shrugging. She shouldered her new bag, immensely grateful for the birthday gift from Blaise. The built in Feather-light charm and Expansion spell would not only actually allow her to actually lift the thing but would also ensure that her books actually fit inside. Holly seriously doubted she would be able to make it without both spells, especially with all the new things she had to lug around.

Pulling her bag the rest of the way onto her shoulder, the girl left her room and descended the hall to the Common Room. There, she hesitated for a moment before seating herself on the settee in front of the fireplace. She really didn't feel like walking to the Great Hall on her own, so she might as well wait for Blaise, who would probably be down soon enough. He knew she was an early riser, and the morning was usually a good time to have a private conversation.

Settling herself, Holly pulled out her new course book for Arithmancy and soon became lost in it, the minutes slipping by, but the feeling of two presences approaching snapped her back to herself. She tilted her head in slight confusion when she recognised the newcomers as Titania Shackbolt and Solaris Morningstar, and the girl was further puzzled when she realised that they weren't coming from their dorms, instead from one of the study rooms.

The third-year glanced up as the two Prefects entered the Common Room, quite curious about what was going on. Her interest only increased when the two didn't exit, instead choosing to approach her. Holly had the distinct impression that both were up at this time to talk

to her, not because they had just happened to wake early, but it wasn't like she could call them on it or anything. Instead, she just nodded to them as they sat, Titania moving in right next to her and Solaris going to the armchair nearby.

"Hi, Holly," the dark-skinned witch greeted, smiling and showing a mouthful of very white teeth.

"Hello, Titania... Solaris," Holly returned, marking her page and closing her book. "How are you?"

"Fine," he replied, and Titania nodded her agreement. "And what about you? Did you have a good summer?"

Holly blinked, her eyes narrowing ever-so-slightly as a suspicion began to form in her mind. She didn't like where this was going, not at all, and especially so when she recalled that Titania's uncle had been present for part of her escape from the Dursleys.

And suddenly, everything made sense.

Kingsley Shacklebolt had probably told his niece what had happened, wanting her to check on Holly. Solaris was most likely there for backup since he was the Prefect she knew best after Titania herself.

The green-eyed girl fought the urge to stiffen when she reasoned this out, and a quick ghosting of their surface thoughts was all the confirmation she needed. Yet, there was something else she noticed in their thoughts, a hint of a deeper reason for their behaviour. Holly didn't know what to make of this, and she wasn't about to discuss her summer. As such, she quickly rose and made her excuses, exiting out the portrait entrance before the Prefects could even object.

The third-year swiftly walked out of dungeons and into the Entrance Hall. There, she noticed a surprising number of students already milling about, an unusual thing considering that it was still rather early. Holly just shook her head and continued on, but she noted that as she went everyone's eyes drifted to her, lingering for longer than was strictly polite. They whispered quietly to each other as she passed by, and a few even pointed.

Truthfully, she was used to receiving attention like this, mostly because of her celebrity and the attacks the previous year, but she had thought that all the excitement would have died down by now. It was either that or something else had happened to pique their curiosity, but the Slytherin really couldn't really think of what.

Holly's thoughts were still turning this idea over when she strolled into the Great Hall, completely ignoring the continued stares. But she was stopped just inside the door by Fred and George Weasley.

"Oy, Holly," Fred said as he and his twin came up to her.

"Hey, mate," George went on. "How're you holding up?"

Holly blinked. "Holding up?" the Slytherin repeated.

The twins exchanged a glance. A silent conversation passed between them, and they pulled her away from the door and to the side where they wouldn't be overheard.

Fred questioned in a much quieter voice, "After yesterday?"

"Yesterday?" Holly again repeated, sounding almost like a broken recording. She wondered what by Siobhan they were talking about.

"Yeah," George said very slowly, "yesterday. I heard that you had a tough time on the train, but you shouldn't worry too much about it. They're horrible things, those Dementors..."

"Sort of freeze your insides, don't they?" Fred replied before turning to the Slytherin. He opened his mouth to speak, but he abruptly hesitated, seeing Holly's expression and not liking it at all.

The girl narrowed her eyes, her lip curling, even as her heart thumped painfully in her chest. "Who told you about that?" she asked, her tone now very frosty.

"Ron," they replied in unison.

Fred continued, "He... er... **mentioned** it at dinner..."

“...And then again in the Common Room,” George finished.

The Slytherin practically growled. “And by ‘mentioned’ I take it to mean that he all but shouted--” She gestured for them to complete the rest of the sentence.

“Er...” George responded with a very peculiar expression on his face. “He said that you fainted on the train and that Blaise had to keep you from smacking into the floor.”

Fred inserted, sounding much more chipper. “Oh, you forgot the part about Malfoy almost doing the same thing. But Ron only mentioned that in passing. He didn’t really give much detail.”

“Yeah,” George agreed. “He was too busy laughing at that point to say much of anything else.”

Her nostrils flared, but she forced herself to calm, putting up a stronger mental shield. “Well, at least, I know why everyone was staring at me this morning.” Her gaze flickered around the room. “And why they’re still staring.”

Both the twins frowned.

“Don’t focus on it too much. It’ll all die down soon enough,” Fred assured her hastily.

George put in brashly, “And forget about the Dementors, Holly. Dad had to go out to Azkaban one time – remember, Fred? And he said it was the worst place he’d ever been. He came back all weak and shaking.” He clapped a hand on her shoulder, squeezing and ignoring her slight flinch. “They suck the happiness out of a place, Dementors. Most of the prisoners go mad in there.”

“Besides, no one will even remember after the first Quidditch match,” Fred insisted, also placing a hand on her shoulders. “Gryffindor versus Slytherin, first game of the season.”

She nodded faintly, her lips actually managing to twitch, and stepped away. “Thanks. I’ll see you.” Holly didn’t wait for a reply, heading for the Slytherin table and plopping herself down between Blaise and

Draco, who had apparently come in during her conversation with the Fred and George.

The blond slipped her Tom's diary underneath the table as she sat, and she didn't even bother to question why he had it instead of Blaise.

"What was all that about?" he inquired after a moment, inclining his head at the Weasley twins as they made their way to the Gryffindor table.

Holly sighed before she leaned over to tell him, and she watched as the smile slid off of Draco's face, only to be replaced by a very deep sneer. On the other side of her, Blaise grimaced, not very happy with what he had heard. Nevertheless, there wasn't much they could do about it now, other than to wait for it to die down.

Besides hexing Ron Weasley, that was.

Their Housemates started to wander into the Great Hall around that time, their other friends soon joining them. Breakfast began in earnest, and Titania walked over to hand out the schedules. She lingered near Holly for longer than was strictly necessary, just watching with far too interested eyes. Fortunately, the Prefect soon moved on, and Holly breathed easier as she looked over her class list. She studied the times for her new classes before passing it along to Milli, momentarily thankful that she had mentioned the Time Turner; else, she would have been strapped for an explanation about her impossible schedule.

"Is anyone alarmed by the fact that none of us are in Muggle Studies?" Gavin questioned after a moment, breaking the silence that had settled over the group. He glanced over Cynthia's timetable before handing it back.

Holly raised an eyebrow at the comment, thinking back to the other schedules she had looked at. Sure enough, none of them had Muggle Studies down, not even Vincent or Greg.

Close by, Autumn snorted. "Well, I wanted to be in it for an easy grade, but McGonagall caught it. She gave me a stern lecture via owl post." She giggled then, clearly recalling.

Theo laughed also, but he stopped when he noticed something odd on Holly's schedule. "Er... Holly, do you know that they have you down for four new subjects?" His light-brown eyes scanned through before looking up at her with a very puzzled expression, which was entirely faked but still completely convincing. "Or that Arithmancy and Divination are at the same time?"

"Really?" Holly inquired, tilting her head up to the side. "Imagine that." She shrugged elegantly, a gesture very reminiscent of Draco. "Not to worry. I have it all worked out.

Milli inserted, fighting the urge to smirk, "Won't it be, you know, rather difficult to be in two places at once?"

"Oh, don't be silly," Draco chastised with a dismissive wave of his hand, his earlier sneer lingering. "Holly can't possibly be in two places at once. It's probably just a mistake on her timetable."

The dark-haired girl inclined her head. "Don't worry about it. Like I said, everything is worked out." She smiled vaguely, her eyes scanning over her friends. Her gaze drifted to the teacher's table, where McGonagall was watching them with unveiled interest.

Holly nodded to the professor, who hastily looked away, busying herself in a conversation with Dumbledore. A wicked grin now on the girl's face, her gaze slid down the table, but her eyes stopped when they landed on Professor Sprout.

The chubby witch was staring down at her food but didn't seem to be eating it. Her face was drawn and tired with a greyish pallor, and her normally fly-away hair was even more wild than usual. Her robes hung from her shoulders a lot more loosely than they had at the end of the previous school term, and it was obvious that she had lost weight.

Holly causally leaned forward, whispering in a low voice, "Look at Professor Sprout. Doesn't she seem really out of sorts, depressed even?" She paused for a moment as the others tried their best to catch a cautious glance of the witch. "What do you reckon is going on?"

“I don’t know,” Gavin replied after he turned his head and glanced at the professor out of the corner of his eye.

Beside him, Theo mimicked his actions and then shrugged.

Luna blinked dreamily from across the table, not even bothering to look as she paused in eating her very burn toast. “Perhaps it has to do with the Heir business from last year.”

“What?” Pansy interjected, obviously not following.

But Holly had already caught on. “That’s right. The real culprit was a Hufflepuff.”

Theo nodded in understanding. “Hm... I bet that’s why. She has to be a bit put out that a Badger was responsible for all this. It is one thing to suspect a Slytherin – we’re all evil ponces anyway – but it’s quite another to know that it was a Hufflepuff.”

The others thought it over before shrugging, and the conversation drifted. Holly glanced at her schedule again, deciding to up her mental shielding as much as she could, which basically left her completely cut off from the minds around her except for those she was most familiar with. She was wary of the effects another version of herself would have on her abilities, especially since she didn’t know what to expect. For all she knew, her other self could merely show up as an echo, or perhaps she wouldn’t even notice at all. Or maybe she wouldn’t be able to handle mental stress and would have a psychotic episode.

Regardless, it was time to leave soon enough, and Holly smiled to Luna before heading off with her year-mates. She waved goodbye to Blaise and Draco at the second floor landing since they were going to Arithmancy, feeling a strange tingle in the back of her mind as she went up the stairs. Of course, Holly was supposed to be there also, and she would be after she used the Time Turner. However, she had Divination first, which she had decided to tackle before anything else since it would probably be her most trying class of the day.

Still, as she followed Milli up one flight of stairs and then another, she couldn’t help but regret her earlier decision. It would be strange

having a class without all of her year-mates there, and perhaps it wasn't a good idea to strike out on her own the first time without her closest friends to back her up. At least, she would have Milli and Theo... and of course Gavin. But they were the only real friends she had taking Divination. Knowing her luck, with the small number of Slytherins and Ravenclaws signed up for the course, it would probably also have Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors.

Holly grimaced at that thought, going up yet another staircase before turning up a side corridor that was carefully concealed between a tapestry and a wall. She silently cursed her professor for choosing a room on the seventh floor and one that was so hard to reach, also managing to be thankful to Solaris at the same time since he had told them exactly where to go. Of course, that only led her back to the incident in the Common Room, and her frown deepened.

Thankfully, it was at that point that they reached their destination, wholly sidetracking her from her now churning thoughts. The three Slytherins and the sole Ravenclaw stepped onto the small landing, studying the sign on the far wall. Almost as one, they finished and peered upwards, seeing a trapdoor high above them.

There was no ladder in sight.

Milli snorted, while Theo and Gavin just shook their heads. Holly sighed and leaned against the wall, wondering why Fate was out to get her.

Soon, they were joined by others: a few Ravenclaws, a smattering of Hufflepuffs, and almost all of the Gryffindor third-years. In fact, only three of them were missing, though it took Holly a moment to realise which three it was. Unfortunately, Ron, Hermione, and Neville did actually show up, appearing on the landing just as the bell rang. Their faces were red with exertion, and the redhead was mumbling something about barmy knights and their stupid quests.

A ladder appeared then, and everyone climbed up, only to find themselves in what seemed to be a cross between a teashop and an attic, complete with strange antiques. Their teacher wasn't in sight, but Holly could sense her hidden in the shadows cast by the fire. She fought the urge to roll her eyes at the dramatics, knowing exactly

what the woman was doing. The girl caught her friends' attention and jerked her head towards a table at the far side of the class, which was partially concealed behind a grandfather clock and a wardrobe. Perhaps they could even sneak and open the window, alleviating some of the oppressive heat and incense.

They made their way over, Holly taking the poof next to the clock and leaning her back against the wall, the window a few centimetres beyond her shoulder. Theo nipped into the seat closest to her, beating out Milli, and the larger girl narrowed her eyes at him before taking the spot opposite Holly. That left Gavin with only the space remaining, the one across from his best mate.

Their professor waited another moment before appearing, and Sybill Trelawney stepped into the light in all her glittering, dragonfly-like glory. She waved her hands in a theatrical greeting as she introduced herself, and her myriad of shawls, rings, and bangles swished and jingled as she daintily sat in a winged armchair by the fire. The witch briefly launched into an explanation of the course, mentioning that not all were as fortunate to be gifted with the Inner Eye like her, but that didn't mean they couldn't try. From there, her eyes drifted to Neville, inquiring after his grandmother's health. She picked up her earlier thread of conversation about the class itself with several more detours when she warned Parvati about red-haired men, mentioned that she would catch the flu in February, and told Lavender that what she feared would come to pass.

Through it all, the Slytherins and Gavin exchanged dubious glances, obviously wondering what they had gotten themselves into. Nonetheless, they did as Trelawney bid and obtained teacups, though Milli chortled loudly when Neville nervously dropped his right after their professor warned him to use the blue ones after he had broken his first. They drank their tea down quickly after casting discreet Cooling charms on the scalding liquid, and during that time, Holly used the opportunity to get a better feel of their teacher.

She sensed a very faint tingle of Mind Magic in the woman, but it was small and insignificant, little more than most witches and wizards had. Still, it was there, and it was entirely possible that she was a Seer. Though probably, she didn't have an everyday skill like Tom and

Luna possessed, meaning that she shouldn't be able to make the sort of predictions that she just had. So either she was making it all up... or she was hiding her talent.

In all honesty, if what Holly perceived was correct, Trelawney's visions were most likely few and far between, and they were almost certainly vague at the very best. Or at least, that was what the Slytherin surmised with her still limited knowledge.

Holly was distracted from probing deeper when Theo exchanged their cups, brushing her hand with his and bending down to study her leaves. She flipped open her copy of Unfogging the Future, doing the same for his. He appeared to have a dagger or maybe a sword, which meant that there was danger approaching him or perhaps a dangerous person nearby, but then again, it could also represent a conflict in the near future. Further, there was some sort of animal that looked like a cross between a horse and an eagle, but Holly couldn't really tell what it was. She couldn't even find a reference to it in the book, and she gave up after about five minutes of trying to determine if it looked more like a griffin or a Pegasus.

Across the table from them, Milli idly looked into Gavin's cup as he asked her what she saw.

"A load of soggy brown rubbish," she replied, "though this does sort of resembled a bowler hat, and that looks like gavel." She pointed to something else, considering what she was seeing. "This could be a scroll. Perhaps it all means you'll work for the Ministry – in the Department of Mysteries most likely."

The Ravenclaw sniffed disdainfully, his opinions about Fudge and the Ministry well known among their group. "I think your Inner Eye is unfocused," he responded with a flick of dismissal, not the least bit impressed. "What about you, Theo?"

The other boy studied Holly's fortune again. "Well, there's an acorn, which means 'a windfall, unexpected gold,'" he quoted from his book and turned the cup around. "This looks like an animal, but I'm not really sure what it is. Could be a cow... maybe a goat... no, llama... perhaps an antelope--"

“Or even a dog,” Holly inserted, leaning over. “I like dogs, especially big black ones.”

Theo gave her a strange look, shaking his head as he went back to guessing.

Trelawney twirled towards them as they laughed, though they thankfully managed to turn their chuckles into coughs. She floated over, snatching Holly’s teacup.

Everyone in the room quieted, seeming fixated at their table.

“Let me see that, my dear,” the professor put in, rotating the cup. “The falcon... my dear, you have a deadly enemy.”

From nearby, Hermione sniffed. “But everyone knows that. Everybody knows about Holly and You-Know-Who,” she finished in a stage whisper, receiving dazed glances from Neville and Ron.

They had never heard her talk to an adult that way, much less a professor.

Trelawney just ignored her, choosing not to reply. “The club... an attack. Dear, dear, this is not a happy cup...” She blinked her very large eyes at the Slytherin. “The skull... danger in your path, my dear...”

Everyone nearby was hanging on her every word, some of them even leaving their seats to get a closer look, but the people at Holly’s table just stonily stared at the woman. Trelawney gave the cup one final turn before shrieking and falling into a nearby chair that was conveniently empty. There was a tinkle as Neville broke another cup, but nobody seemed to care. They were too busy hounding their teacher, wondering what she had seen.

“My dear girl... my poor, dear girl... no... it is kinder not to say... no don’t ask me,” Trelawney murmured, though Holly had the distinct impression that she was in fact waiting to be asked.

When she was by Dean, the woman whispered, “My dear, you have the Grim.”

Holly fought the urge to laugh, not wanting to appear completely crazed this early in the school year and somehow managing to school her features. "Oh, really?" she returned, and she couldn't help but think that Sirius would definitely get a kick out of this.

Trelawney just looked at her with mournful eyes before turning away, apparently too saddened to say anything else, regardless of how Hermione hounded her on it. The other students remained silent, quickly backing away from Holly's table like she had suddenly transformed into an enraged Basilisk and hurriedly returning to their seats, occasionally shooting her concerned looks when they thought she wouldn't notice.

The Slytherin shook her head at that, fighting the urge to snigger in spite of the tense atmosphere that had now settled over the room. Milli just rolled her eyes and leaned over to murmur to Gavin about how Trelawney's Inner Eye must have cataracts. Theo patted Holly's arm, smirking when he realised that she actually found their professor's theatrics quite funny. He spent the rest of the lesson talking rather loudly about all the tragic crystal ball accidents he had read about in a recent *Quibbler* article.

After the class ended, Holly managed to escape from her Housemates on their way to Charms, ducking into a side staircase and heading for the second floor landing where she had last seen Blaise and Draco. She hid in a small alcove to the side, frowning when Hermione followed her in. Unfortunately, the other girl had kept up with her after Divination and was even now also pulling out her Time Turner. The Gryffindor was in the same Arithmancy class, so there would be no escaping her. Nevertheless, that didn't mean that they had to make their journey through time together, and Holly silently promised herself that she would avoid that as much as possible.

Fighting a scowl, the Slytherin gave her Time Tuner a turn, mentally estimating the time she had left her year-mates. Hermione copied her actions, thankfully remaining silent through the entire procedure. Holly had the brief sensation that she was flying backwards with shapes and images whirling by her, but then, she was back to herself, the Gryffindor still with her.

She instantly reached out for her friends, finding them not even fifteen metres away and telling them exactly where she was. Holly sensed her past self heading up the stairs, experiencing a very strange moment of déjà vu, but her increased mental shielding from the morning kept her from having any other bizarre repercussions. Nearby, the bushy-haired girl blinked at her, catching her expression. She was about to open her mouth, but voices going by their hidey-hole made her freeze.

"Hm... I wonder where Holly went," someone, who suspiciously sounded like Draco, stated.

"I don't know," another voice, this one sounding like Blaise, responded.

Holly smirked, actually daring a wink at Hermione before stepping into the corridor.

"I'm right behind you," she said, coming up to them and giving them each a mental poke. "Honestly, I've been here the entire time."

Both boys had to fight chuckles as they made their way to their classroom. The door was already open, and inside, the desks were arranged in sets of four with two on one side of the square and two on the other, situated so that no one's back would be to the front. There was only one other person inside, their instructor, and she nodded at them as they entered, gesturing that they should sit and remain silent. They took the chairs closest to the window with Pansy nipping into the fourth seat before Hermione could even move halfway across the room. Hiding their smirks, they used the wait for the other students to inspect their teacher.

The witch was plain-faced, though she had some of the most expressive eyes Holly had ever seen. However, they competed with her glossy, dark-brown hair for the honour of being her most striking feature. She looked roughly around Professor Snape's age, and after she started speaking, it was obvious that she shared the same passion for her chosen field and a similar biting sense of humour, though hers was a gentler version. She simply stood in front of her desk, arms crossed over her chest, watching as everyone walked in.

“Salutations, class,” the witch announced after the bell rang and the last student dashed inside, the door nearly closing on Ernie MacMillan’s heels. However, their professor didn’t seem too concerned by this. “I’m assuming that since you signed up for this course, you each know your numbers and possess the ability to count. If not, there is the door.” She gestured to the exit. “Don’t bother coming back.”

The woman paused, hazel eyes sweeping over all those gathered. They drifted over to Hannah Abbott and the large flower clip in her hair before flicking to Justin Finch-Fletchley, whose tie was undone. Her gaze went to Blaise next, gleaming with approval when he steadily looked back at her.

When no one took her up on her offer, the witch started again, “Very well then. I am Professor Vector, and I welcome you to Arithmancy, the science of magical numbers. Numbers are inherently important in nature and therefore in magic.” She took a step backwards and seated herself on the edge of her desk. “For example, the amount of something, the number you put into a potion has a variety of effects. A single extra drop of griffin blood in a Mind Strengthening potion could make it more effectual or cause it to blow up in your face.” She lifted her right hand, rubbing it across her chin. “Performing a Binding ritual on a compatible date will reinforce the connection, while doing it on an incompatible day will cause it to dissolve entirely.” She idly traced her fingertips along the side of her face, the students watching her every move.

“It’s all about numbers: how much you put into something, when you do something, etcetera. It all centres on numbers,” Vector said, her voice smoothing over them in a very Snape-like fashion. “This course focuses on the inherent qualities of numbers and their use in magic and in spells, whether they are verbal or otherwise. We will learn how to calculate, how to manipulate, and how to control numbers.” Her eyes burned with some unknown emotion, voice filling with zeal.

Blaise and Holly exchanged a glance, both wondering if this woman was a fellow Slytherin. She certainly seemed to fit the bill, though it was hard to tell sometimes.

The witch continued after a moment, "Your task for the day is a simple quiz, more of an assessment of your mathematical skills." Professor Vector waved her wand, and a paper appeared on each table. "This is not a partner activity. It will be your own work, but I will not require you to move your desks. I trust that you will be able to keep your eyes to yourself. If not..." she trailed off, smiling, but there wasn't any warmth to it. Her eyes flashed, and almost everyone gulped.

"Since Arithmancy is in essence a course on the magic of numbers, the ability to manipulate them is definite requirement. This means that if you cannot add, subtract, multiply, or divide correctly, then you cannot possibly survive in this class." She paused, finally rising from her desk, eyes narrowing to slits.

Several of the students shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

"I staunchly refuse to accept any student who doesn't possess the most basic of skills, even though there are spells that will actually calculate for you." Vector gestured, stopping anyone before they could interrupt. "These are meant to be an aid, not a crutch. You needed the fundamentals to have something to build on later." Her eyes flickered to the clock on the wall. "You have the rest of the period. You may leave after you have turned in your papers. Any questions?"

No one said anything, most of the students too intimidated to speak.

Vector just smirked. "Good. Begin... now."

Holly turned over her paper, studying it carefully and all but beaming. The problems on it were ridiculously easy, most of it things taught early on in Muggle primary schools. It was a mixture of simple addition and subtraction with a smattering of multiplication and division, and even then, the numbers involved never exceeded double digits. She finished in less than ten minutes, the first to do so, though she was closely followed by Draco, Hermione, and surprisingly Vincent. Blaise seemed to be taking a bit longer, but then, arithmetic wasn't exactly his favourite thing. Still, he was done before most of the others, joining the green-eyed girl as she rose to turn in her paper.

Afterwards, they lingered in the corridor for several minutes, waiting for the rest of their Housemates to finish so that they could all go to Charms together. They were joined by Pansy, Cynthia, and Daphne soon after and slowly walked up to the fourth floor. Their timing was impeccable because the Slytherins coming from Divination met them right outside the Charms corridor, and under the watchful eyes of one of the castle's portraits, Holly was able to slip in with them like she had been there the entire time.

Charms itself was lively as always. Flitwick greeted them with a flourish, and the lesson passed in a pleasant blur. Lunch afterwards went along the same lines, only interrupted by even more pointing and staring than there had been at breakfast. Apparently, the story of the Grim in Holly's teacup had spread like wildfire throughout the entire school, and everyone was just waiting for her to drop dead on them. Regardless, even that wasn't enough to dampen her much improved mood as she walked across the grounds to her first ever Care of Magical Creatures class.

The sun shined brightly, a marked change from the previous day, as they approached Hagrid's hut. However, her smile dimmed somewhat when she noticed the growing crowd already outside it, all of them wearing red and gold ties. Her mood further plummeted when the Golden Gryffindor Trio themselves saddled up to her, Ron shooting a glare at a nearby Draco.

Thankfully, Hagrid materialised before anything could happen, leading them over to an empty paddock by the Forbidden Forest. He instructed them to open their textbooks, though only the Slytherins actually managed it.

Holly easily ran her fingers down the spine of her own Monster Book of Monsters, just like the store manager from Flourish and Blotts had told her to do. Her friends simply copied her actions.

The Lions weren't so fortunate, having to battle with their own books instead. Dean was running after his, which had escaped and was making for the woods. Ron was currently on the ground, wrestling with his book and apparently losing. Neville's text was ripping into his forearm, despite Seamus and his best attempts to remove it.

Lavender and Parvati were sitting on theirs, deciding that the belts wrapped around the buggers were not enough to keep them shut. Hermione still had her textbook in her bag, the only one with the sense to keep the blasted thing completely contained.

A not-so-small part of Holly enjoyed watching them struggle, payback for their earlier treatment of her, but Hagrid put an early end to her fun, saving the Gryffindors in the process.

Five minutes later, everyone's text was now open, and their teacher finally brought the creatures for the day into the paddock, holding several chains in his large hands. The things looked something from one of the horror movies Dudley used to watch with the body of a horse but the wings and head of a predatory bird. Their forelimbs were also bird-like, complete with very long and wicked looking talons that complemented their fierce, orange eyes in a morbid sort of way.

"Hippogriffs! Beau'iful, aren' they?" Hagrid beamed, bidding everyone forward, though nobody really moved. "Now, firs' thing yeh gotta know about 'em is, they're proud. Easily offended, hippogriffs are. Don't never insult one 'cause it might be the last thing yeh do." His grin widened as he fondly looked at his creatures. "Yeh always wait fer the hippogriff ter make the firs' move. It's polite, see? Yeh walk toward him, and yeh bow, an' yeh wait. If he bows back, yeh're allowed ter touch him. If he doesn' bow, then get away from him sharpish 'cause those talons hurt."

The man stopped for a minute, rubbing his hands together. "Right. Who wants ter go first?" He peered around at everyone, not really seeing their nervous expressions. "No one?" he asked after a moment, when most of the students had backed away even further.

Holly had the brief flash of the Grim in her teacup and Trelawney's reaction if the woman knew what she was currently considering.

"I'll do it," she announced proudly.

Draco, who had been eyeing a greyish hippogriff with a wary expression, blinked.

"Holly," he whispered heatedly, "what are you doing?"

She just winked at him, even as Lavender and Parvati murmured, "Oooh, no, remember your tealeaves."

Draco blinked again, obviously not following, but he remained silent when Blaise discreetly elbowed him in the stomach.

"Go for it, Hols," the caramel-skinned boy stated, giving his approval.

Holly resolutely handed her book to Pansy and marched right up to the grey hippogriff Hagrid directed her to. Buckbeak rolled an orange eye towards her, watching as she established eye contact and slowly bowed. The girl waited for several breathless moments, her eyes starting to water, and she was just about to back away when the hippogriff lowered his head in a short but distinct bow.

The other students cheered, Draco heaving a sigh of relief and Blaise giving her a thumbs up.

At Hagrid's further bidding, she lightly patted Buckbeak's beak. The creature's eyes slid shut, and he gave a low chirp of approval. Her professor beamed, and the girl had the distinct impression that he was about to drop a bombshell.

"Righ' then, Holly. I reckon he might' let yeh ride him!"

This was far more than Holly bargained for, but before she could object, Hagrid lifted her onto Buckbeak's back. The hippogriff unfurled his large wings and flapped, forcing her to throw her arms around his neck. It took only a few seconds for the Slytherin to decide that she didn't like flying like this at all. The beat of the wings disrupted her seat, and the feathers around Buckbeak's neck were too glossy to get a firm grip on. She felt as though she would fall off at any moment, and it came as a great relief when the hippogriff landed, though she was almost jostled off in the process.

Everyone stepped into the paddock afterwards, buoyed by her success. Holly dazedly stumbled off to the side, Blaise taking her elbow to steady her. She waved Draco and Theo on with her other hand, and they reluctantly walked toward Buckbeak, taking over for her.

However, just as they passed by Ron, the redhead stuck his leg out, tripping Draco.

The blond somehow managed to keep his feet, mostly due to his friend's quick grab for him. He rose, shooting a sneer at the Gryffindor but thankfully shrugging it off. The two continued over to Buckbeak, bowing and receiving the same in return.

"This isn't so bad," Theo said, now gently scratching under the hippogriff's chin.

Draco shook his head. "Not really. It's--"

He abruptly cut off, ducking as something flew overhead. He whirled around, sneering at Ron, who was trying and failing to look innocent. Resolutely, the blond turned back around, but this time, he moved so that he could see the redhead out of the corner of his eye.

The incident was all but forgotten a few minutes later, Draco returning his full attention to the hippogriff. Blaise, now satisfied that Holly was perfectly fine, was just about to walk over to join his roommates when a small rock soared through the air at them. This time, Draco didn't duck, and the stone nailed him in the back of his head.

He snarled, whipping around to glower at the Gryffindor. "Look, you heinous git, stop it."

Beside him, Buckbeak growled very low, thinking the human was addressing him, but the boy didn't notice.

"Just stop, you ugly brute--"

Holly only had a flash of forewarning, but it was enough for her to mentally shove Draco to the side. Nevertheless, the hippogriff's claws still clipped him on the arm, drifting to rake across his chest.

Pansy, who had seen the entire thing, screamed, thereby distracting the creature from his intended target long enough for the blond to get away.

Buckbeak whirled on Theo then, but the other boy had already dashed out of range. Still, he barely missed being skewered before Hagrid came rushing in and wrestled the hippogriff back into his collar and leash.

The giant man subsequently turned then to his injured student, who was on the ground, bleeding profusely. He lifted the boy easily, going through the gate that Blaise had hastily thrown open and taking off for the Hospital Wing. As they passed, Holly saw that Draco had a long deep gash on his arm and a matching one across his chest.

The entire class trailed after them, though at a slower pace. Holly and Blaise were at the front of the group, the other Slytherins just behind them. Hermione and Ron were at the end of the line, the bushy-haired witch loudly tearing into her friend.

“Oh, Draco... I hope he’ll be all right,” Pansy whimpered as Greg awkwardly patted her arm in what was supposed to be a comforting gesture.

“And you, Theo?” Holly questioned breathlessly, checking over the other boy with a worried gaze. She felt Blaise put his hand on her arm, even as her belly twisted with concern.

Theo shrugged, slightly wide-eyed. “I’m fine. The thing just missed me, but Draco...” he trailed off, not knowing what else to say.

The others nodded, picking up their pace and approaching the castle in record time. Holly heard Hermione’s voice hit a peak as she reached the door, and she turned to look back, her stomach churning again.

Ron Weasley’s face was completely white, and the last Holly saw of the boy as she went inside was him standing stock still, completely frozen and oblivious to Hermione’s tirade.

But no matter how pathetic the redhead looked, the Slytherin girl couldn’t forget the expression on Draco’s face as the hippogriff had attacked him. She merely curled her lip at the Gryffindor before steeling her resolve. Holly hurried up the stairs, her Housemates at her heels, all but running for the Hospital Wing.

AN: All right, boys and girls, I just wanted to tell you that from here on out the years get progressively longer in terms of chapters. This is mostly due to the fact that the books themselves keep getting longer. That means that I will go more in depth with each storyline, which is a good thing. There should be less glossing over of important things as we go, but that also means it will take more time to get into the central part of the story. The rest of Holly's first week should be in the next chapter. Hopefully, after that, things will pick up some.

Also, yes, I know it might be a bit strange that she told everyone about her Time Turner, but it saves her (and me) a lot of hassle coming up with excuses. Further, I know that Luna, Tom, and Sirius don't really show up in this chapter, but I hope to fix that in the next one. Finally, I will slowly introduce Arithmancy and Ancient Runes over the next few chapters/years. I don't want to completely overdose everyone on them.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Dancing with Wolves

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Dancing with Wolves

"What do you mean he's not going to be expelled!?" Pansy all but shouted the next morning as they walked to Defence.

Her fellow third-years also voiced their similar feelings, most scowling in annoyance and fingering their wands.

Draco, however, simply sighed. "Weasley isn't expelled, and he won't be because Hagrid did not see anything," he stated in a very calm voice, which was completely at odds with the dangerous glint in his eyes. "And it wasn't exactly like Hagrid believed me when I told him what happened. He might have believed Holly, but McGonagall booted her out of the room."

From beside him, Holly frowned deeply. "She said that it was past curfew and that I would serve detention for the rest of the week if I didn't return to the dorms."

Blaise snorted, coming up on her other side. "If that was not an outright lie, I don't know what is. You had at least an hour left." He resituated Draco's bag on his shoulder, nice enough to carry it for his injured friend.

"That's it?" Pansy asked incredulously, stomping down the hall. "They don't believe you, so they don't even go further, try to find out the truth."

"Basically." Draco rubbed his free hand over his face, blinking tiredly.

Holly, taking pity on him, went on, "Well, Ron started it, but McGonagall claims that Draco didn't have to respond. That's why Ron doesn't even have detention. If he did, Draco would have to serve it as well, and it's not like he can retaliate openly without getting the same."

"That is just plain moronic," Milli inserted, rolling her eyes. "Weasley is clearly at fault, and it would be easy enough to see that if they just bothered asking the rest of the class what happened. Merlin's beard, even Granger thought he was out of line." She sniffed disdainfully at the mention of the bushy-haired Gryffindor, gaze flickering to the

blond. "We'll just have to wait a while for revenge, when he's least suspecting it." She was about to say more on that, but her eyes suddenly narrowed as she suddenly realised something.

"Er... Draco, if you don't mind me asking, why is your arm still in a sling?"

The blond shrugged as best he could, wincing at the motion. "Hippogriffs have some kind of substance on their talons that makes wounds resistant to magical healing. Spells still work somewhat, but they aren't nearly as effective." He exhaled softly. "Or at least that's what Pomfrey told me. She could have been lying for all I know. She didn't exactly seem happy to see me."

Holly nodded. "I think that she's still mad you didn't immediately take me to her when I sprained my ankle last year," she commented, remembering how she had twisted her foot in the Chamber of Secrets and the fact that Dumbledore had inadvertently delayed her treatment for several hours.

"What about Quidditch?" Autumn asked from behind them, obviously having listened in. "Weren't you going to try out next week for the open Chaser spot?"

A small smile actually managed to work its way onto Draco's face. "Well, I really shouldn't have to worry about that. Marcus knows I'm a good flyer, and he has been grooming me for the position since last year. Besides, he already talked about it with me this morning in the Common Room. He said that he would give me a chance to try out against anyone he picked for Chaser."

The Muggleborn girl pursed her lips. "That's good, I suppose. If you do it after you've healed completely."

"And you're going to wait until then," Milli put in, but it was a demand and not a question. "I mean, I would hate for you to spend the rest of your life with a sling attached because you were too impatient to wait. Of course," she added with a smirk, eyes glinting, "you would make an awful Potions master with the use of only one arm."

"Yes, mother," Draco replied dryly, slightly annoyed.

A career as a Potions master was one of his childhood dreams, and curse Milli for using it against him.

The heavy-set witch just chuckled and shot a secretive wink at Pansy. "Good choice." She patted him on his head much like one would stroke a dog.

"You're such a good boy, little dragon," other girl inserted, joining in the fun with an imitation of Narcissa as she also petted him. "Mother just loves it when you listen to her." She placed her hands over the left side of her chest, sighing dreamily. "It makes my heart fill with joy that my baby is growing up to be such a fine man. Oh, I am so very happy right now."

The blond sneered, one eye twitching. "My mum does not sound like that," he defended, stepping closer to Holly to get away.

But Pansy just moved in further. She patted his head again.

"Would you cut that out?" Draco batted her hands away, smoothing back his hair with a fierce scowl.

Pansy laughed. "No," she said with a wink, sidestepping as he whirled to face her. With another chuckle and one final tap, she drifted further back into their group.

The other Slytherins sniggered. Draco growled.

Beside him, Holly just shook her head, more interested in her own thoughts than anything else. She nibbled the inside of her lip as she continued down the corridor in silence, the faint clicking of her new dragonhide boots the only audible sound coming from her. The boots themselves were her birthday gift from Draco, who felt that with her history and tendency for trouble she needed sturdier footwear. Holly wasn't about to object either. The shiny, black boots were exceptionally cool looking, not to mention comfortable.

Her birthday party itself had only been the day before and had been very subdued affair, especially so since Draco hadn't even been there, Pomfrey demanding that he stay the night. Still, he had insisted that the festivities go on without him, not that anyone had really seemed

to enjoy it, despite their efforts. However, even the fact that they were celebrating for five different people, including Luna, hadn't improved their moods.

To convolute matters even more, Sirius had finally been able to change back the evening before in one of rooms off Slytherin's secret passageways. It wasn't exactly the best place since it didn't even have furniture, but he would be staying there until they could think of something else. All told, this solution was still better than remaining a kitten for an indefinite amount of time, even if they would have to continuously sneak food to him lest he starve. The fact that he could leave and enter the passageways himself now only added to its appeal. Holly had finally gotten the portrait guardians to accept an English password but only from certain people. This way, no one walking by could accidentally say it and discover their secret, while her friends would be able to get inside without her around.

Yet, in spite of all that, Sirius just had to make everything indefinitely more complicated by choosing last night of all nights to speak to Holly about her choice of House. The Animagus had been exceptionally surprised the day before when he had woken up to green bed curtains, apparently expecting the blue of Ravenclaw or the red of Gryffindor, and the girl couldn't help but rub at her temples as she recalled their conversation.

(Flashback)

Holly entered the room with Snuffles in one hand and the diary in the other, closing the door behind her automatically. An instant later, Tom appeared, gazing around the room. It was empty save for them and the two enchanted windows on the far wall, but he still managed to study it for several moments before turning back to smile at his friend, producing his wand from his pocket. The thing wasn't nearly as good a match to him as hers, but it would work. Plus, it wasn't like Sirius could change back on his own without help, and Holly still wasn't good enough at Transfiguration to pull it off.

As it was, Sirius' Animagus transformation was nothing like the Transfiguration spell. Basically, this meant that he could actually spell himself into a cat, but he couldn't force himself to revert back. He

either had to wait until the spell wore off, which could take up to a week, or he had to get someone else, namely Tom, to change him back.

All in all, it was a headache filled scenario. Fortunately, it was one the diary-wizard temporarily resolved when he flicked his wand, and a beam of blue light shot out of the end, hitting Snuffles. The kitten instantly grew in size, his fur and tail receding and feline features morphing into that of a human.

“Thanks,” Sirius said as he slowly stood and patted his hands over his chest, checking to make sure everything was in order. “It’s so nice to be me again, being a dog’s great and all, but a cat’s pretty rough on me. They’re just too small.”

Holly snickered. “Not to mention that Milli and Pansy latched onto you in that form.”

The Animagus shuddered. “Your friends are very strange, Holly. Very dotty, especially that blonde with the big eyes.” He finished his examination and bound over to her, but he hesitated before somewhat awkwardly squeezing her shoulder in greeting.

Tom, who had been watching from the side, inserted himself in the conversation, “Luna, you mean.”

“That’s the one,” Sirius replied, strangely eyeing the boy’s robe. “Name suits her rather well I’d say.” He glanced around then, getting a feel for how different the place looked through human eyes and whistling softly when he did. “This place really is big,” he commented. “I thought it was just my imagination since I was so small.” He paused. “Strange, there’s no dust at all.” His gaze drifted to her, lingering for several moments, brow furrowing in consideration.

“Something on your mind, Sirius?” Holly prompted after she noticed the odd way he was looking at her.

He nibbled on his lip, seemingly fighting the urge to twitch. “Er... yeah, but it’s...” Sirius hesitated, taking a deep breath. “I didn’t expect you to be a Slytherin.”

The girl blinked and exhaled very softly but otherwise remained silently, not really knowing what to say. It had never really occurred to her that this could be a problem, and there was a small twinge of worry in her chest as she looked up at him.

“Oh, I...” She fought the urge to fidget, the twinge becoming a full blown stab. “I just never thought to mention it. You’re not... mad, are you?” she asked in slightly breathless tone, desperately hoping that he wasn’t.

Holly didn’t want to alienate him, not over something seemingly so small in the grand scheme of things. Not when she had finally found an adult who was interested in her for herself.

“I mean...**Slytherin**,” he said like it explained everything, hand loosening and then tightening on her shoulder. “I just thought Ravenclaw for sure since you read so much. Plus, Lily almost went there,” Sirius rambled nervously. “I probably should have worked it out since Tom is wearing Slytherin colours, not to mention that you all seemed so cunning. But then, James and I were the same way at your age, though we tended to prank more than anything.”

Tom raised an eyebrow, trying to make sense of what the man had just said. “Yes, but you also didn’t have Voldemort out for your blood or half the wizarding world on your case.”

“That’s true,” Sirius allowed. “I just didn’t think... Slytherin!” He rubbed at his temples with his free hand.

“You have a problem with Slytherin then?” Holly questioned in a very neutral tone, which belied her faint trembling.

“What! No... not at all. I just... well, I didn’t expect it, you see,” Sirius hastily inserted, trying to reassure her. “The Hat tried to put me there, but I didn’t go because it was so expected for me. My family wanted me to be a Slytherin. And well, they weren’t the nicest of people. And I was a bit of a rebel.”

Tom snorted at that, the other male shooting him a look. However, he kept going like he hadn’t been so rudely interrupted.

“But if you’re happy there – really happy – then I guess this is fine. More than fine.” He put his other hand on her shoulder, squeezing tightly.

Holly studied him for minute. “I am. I’m very happy here – happier than I would have been anywhere else. I have friends here... real friends, and they could care less that I’m the Girl-Who-Lived. To them, I’m just Holly.” A small smile tugged at her lips. “That’s all I have ever wanted.”

“All right then,” the Animagus responded, nodding in understanding.

Sirius hesitated in front of her, looking as though he wanted to embrace her but wasn’t sure if he was allowed. She gazed at him for a long moment before taking a small step toward him.

This was all the invitation the man need, and he closed the rest of the gap between them, loosely slipping his arms around her and resting his chin on her hair. A minute later, her arms rose to encircle him also.

Nearby, Tom watched silently. There was a very odd expression on his face before he turned away, letting them have a private moment. But neither of them noticed.

Sirius tightened his hold on her, face tilting to the side. “It doesn’t matter to me, Holly,” he whispered in her ear, “not at all. Like I said, as long as you’re happy... then so am I.”

The girl beamed then, giving a true grin and leaning fully into his embrace. She had no way of knowing that this would be one of the few bright points in her life over the next several days.

(End of flashback)

“Why does everything always have to be so difficult? Theo put in unexpectedly, startling Holly from her thoughts.

The conversation had apparently continued on around her, which is why his question didn’t make much sense.

“But at least we don’t have this class with the Gryffindors,” the boy went on. “Potions and Care of Magical Creatures are bad enough. Though we do have to put up with the Hufflepuffs.”

The girl blinked dazedly before realising that they were standing in front of Defence classroom. She shook her head to clear her thoughts, slipping inside behind an oddly smiling Blaise with Draco following just behind. However, the grin slid right off of the caramel-skinned boy’s face as he remembered where they were, noting their teacher at the front of the room.

Instantly, his good mood vanished, and he froze, Holly almost crashing into him. She thankfully managed to sidestep, steadying Draco, who had nearly done exactly the same thing.

In front of them, Blaise stiffened noticeably, condescendingly sniffing and all but glaring at Remus. Fortunately, their professor didn’t notice, too busy fiddling with the ancient phonograph by the far wall. The brown-eyed Slytherin hesitated for a moment before handing Draco’s bag to Holly and stalking over to a seat in the far corner of the back row.

The other two just stared after him, exchanging a look, her eyes drifting to their professor and then sliding back to Blaise. She sighed tiredly and was about to move after her friend when he waved her away, inclining his head to the front where he knew she wanted to sit. Holly shook her head in exasperation before actually doing as he bid a moment later, Draco trailing behind her. She marched resolutely up to the front row, robes billowing out in a very Snape-esque manner, fighting the urge to slam both of their bags down as she took a chair.

“I honestly don’t know what is wrong with him lately,” Draco intoned, his irritation from earlier only degenerating further as he sat down.

Holly nodded in agreement, gaze drifting to Blaise in the back of the class. “He doesn’t like Remus for obvious reasons, but I had thought him better than that,” she murmured back. “I thought that he didn’t hold with prejudice.”

The blond shrugged one-sidedly.

"It's hard too tell with some people," Theo inserted as sat on Holly's other side, giving her a brief smile that made her frustration ebb significantly.

Draco nodded. "That's true. Not that I can really make judgements about that sort of thing," he added with slitted eyes.

She shook her head. "You're much better about that now." Holly paused for a moment, watching as Remus gave up on the phonograph, apparently deciding that it wouldn't work. "Still, I can't help but think that there has to be a reason behind this."

Theo snorted, redirecting her attention. "You mean, other than him being raised that way. Honestly, Holly," he said softly, reaching for her underneath their table, "that's all there is to it sometimes. People are taught that another kind is bad, and then, they pass it on."

He gave her fingers a brief squeeze before releasing them and returning his attention to their teacher, who was now standing in front of his desk. The girl exhaled, but whatever response she might have given was cut off when Professor Lupin started speaking.

"Good morning. Would you please put all your books back in your bags? Today's will be a practical lesson. You will only need your wands."

Everyone did as he bid, looking around at each other. However, Draco stilled, not doing anything.

Holly's eyes narrowed as she immediately realised what the problem was, silently berating herself for not thinking of this earlier. Her friend was left-handed, the same hand that was currently in a sling, and she had never seen him cast with his right. She didn't even know if he could.

"Professor," she stated, raising her voice. "What about--"

"No worries, Mr. Malfoy," the man inserted before she was even finished. "Madam Pomfrey has already spoken to me about it. You'll have to sit this lesson out. Just stay in the back of the group." He

smiled kindly. "Right then. If everyone would follow me." He exited the classroom and led them down a side hallway to an abandoned room.

The inside was empty, save for a single trunk near the back wall.

Holly studied the thing, a strange sensation shooting down her spine. She would bet all her gold in Gringotts that there was something inside, and whatever it was, it certainly wasn't friendly. Her suspicions were confirmed as the trunk gave an unexpected wobble, banging into the wall behind it.

"Nothing to worry about," the Defence teacher informed them, a few of the Hufflepuffs along with Autumn and Vincent having jumped. "There's a boggart in there."

Nobody seemed very happy to hear this. Several students actually stepped backwards, edging toward the door.

Professor Lupin just smiled, closing it with a flick of his wand. His grin widened as he proceeded to tell them about boggarts, mentioning that they were shape-shifters that took the form of whatever most frightened their intended target. He continued his lecture, awarding Holly five points when she correctly answered a question and Draco five more for another and showing them the spell they needed to defeat the creature.

"Now, remember. It's *Riddikulus*," he said very calmly, correcting Hannah Abbott's pronunciation. His eyes drifted over his students for a moment before landing on Holly and then promptly darting away.

She had the sudden impression that he was not going to let her face the boggart.

Of course, the way his mind was filled with flashes of a Boggart-Voldemort readily explained why.

Holly just exhaled slowly at that and made her way back over to Draco by the door after waving for Theo to stay. At least there, she wouldn't be in the way.

“Hm... Right, Autumn,” Professor Lupin called to the Muggleborn, “why don’t you come up here?” He gestured to the spot beside him, and the redhead reluctantly did as she was told. “First things first: what would you say is the thing that frightens you most in the world?”

The Slytherin blinked, fidgeting very faintly. “I’d probably have to say... er... spaces... enclosed ones,” she whispered in a tiny voice.

“Enclosed spaces... hm... Autumn, I think I have an idea about that.” He leaned forward and murmured something in her ear.

She looked at him for a moment with confusion before finally nodding and stepping away.

“On the count of three, Autumn.” The man lifted his wand. “One – two – three – now!”

Sparks shot out the end and hit the trunk’s latch. It burst open.

Suddenly, there was a person-sized box in the centre of the room, Autumn nowhere in sight.

Everyone gasped, Pansy’s eyes bugging out as she inched closer. However, they then heard a muffled “*Riddikulus!*” And the box suddenly became a flattened piece of wood on the floor, complete with footprints and pink painted flowers as Autumn stumbled out.

“Good. Susan! Go!” their teacher shouted.

The Hufflepuff went forward.

With a loud crack, the boggart turned into a black fog that completely enveloped her, and it took everyone a few heartbeats to understand what the cloud represented.

Apparently, Susan was afraid of the dark.

“*Riddikulus!*” she cried, and the dark fog was now trapped in a jar the size of her hand, droning much like a bee.

“Ernie!”

Crack! The jar became a zombie, dead eyes riveted on the boy. It shuffled closer, hands outstretched.

"Riddikulus!"

And the zombie was now a marble statue, a comical expression on its face. Crack! It turned into a mini-tidal wave. Crack! It was a scorpion. Crack! Now a blood-coated rabbit with fearsome incisors.

"It's confused. We're getting there! Pansy!"

Crack! The bunny transformed into a swarm of insects, which buzzed menacingly.

"Riddikulus!" Pansy said easily, flipping her hair.

The insects were now separated from the room by a thick, glass wall.

"Excellent! Blaise, you next!"

The Slytherin started when his name was called, but the boggart turned to him before he could even think to back away. There was another crack, and suddenly, where the swarm had been there was a large, hulking beast. It was enormous with sharp claws and a long snout full of very pointy teeth. Its golden eyes all but glowed with madness, foam pouring from its mouth.

Blaise took a stunned step backwards, his eyes impossibly wide. He raised his wand without even meaning to, but Professor Lupin jumped in front of him an instant later.

"Here!"

And the thing vanished, replaced by a silvery-white orb that just hung in the air. The entire class blinked with surprise, clearly confused as to what it was.

However, it was gone an instant later when their teacher lazily said, *"Riddikulus."*

Crack!

“Go, Autumn, and finish it off!”

The Muggleborn determinately strode forward. The box appeared once more, this time turning completely bright pink.

“Riddikulus.”

The box exploded into wisps of smoke, vanishing completely.

Almost everyone went forward to congratulate her, but Blaise wasn't included among them. In fact, he was practically glued to the far wall, where he had run after their professor had stepped in front of him.

Professor Lupin was gazing at him sadly, but he was soon distracted by his other students. He assigned them all homework before subsequently dismissing them, his face oddly blank.

Blaise boy was out the door like a shot a second later. Holly only saw the ends of his robe whipping around a corner as she chased after him, leaving a confused Draco in the capable hands of Milli and Pansy.

The girl caught up with her friend half-way down another passageway.

He was leaning his forehead against the wall, breathing hard. His knuckles were white where they gripped his wand. She half expected it to snap any second; he was holding it that tightly.

Holly stepped to him, touching him with her fingertips. “Blaise, are you all right?”

She reached out with her mind as well, only to slam into a barrier as she brushed his thoughts. The girl mentally stumbled, not ever having experienced this with him before, and she stared up at him with very confused and apprehensive eyes.

He snapped back to himself then, jerking around and freeing himself from her grip.

“I'm fine.” The boy stared at the far wall, not meeting her gaze.

“You don’t look fine.” She clearly didn’t believe him, despite the fact that she couldn’t get a clear read on him.

Again, the girl reached for him with her mind, once more brushing the weird barrier around his thoughts.

“Let it go, Holly. It’s nothing,” he responded, finally looking at her.

She considered his request but decided to disregard it, knowing that if she didn’t say anything now, it would only come back to bite them on the arse later on.

“What... what was that?” Holly tried again, using a very gentle voice. She placed her little hands on his arm, twisting her fingers in the fabric of his sleeve.

“It’s nothing,” Blaise ground out, stiffening under her touch. “I don’t want to talk about this now,” he growled in response, attempting and failing to pull away.

“But you need to. I can tell, and that thing looked like...” She shook her head. “I mean, was that what I think it was?”

“It’s nothing, Hols!” he stated heatedly. “Leave it alone. We aren’t going to talk about this.”

Holly shook her head, grip tightening. “No, we are,” she insisted. “We need to work this out.”

He inhaled sharply, nostrils flaring. “I said leave it alone! Can’t you see that I don’t want to talk about this right now! Or ever for that matter!” Blaise shouted at her, gesturing violently and actually surprising himself in the process.

He had never raised his voice to her before, not like that. Not once. Not ever.

He froze at the look on her face, her impossibly large, green eyes blinking up at him. He felt her hands trembled ever-so-slightly on his forearm.

“I...” Blaise started, her fingers dropping away from him. “I... I’m sorry, Holly. I didn’t mean...” He took a step towards her but faltered when she drew back. “I...”

Shaking his head, he turned and fled down the hallway.

This time, she didn’t follow.

Blaise avoided her for the rest of the day, not sitting next to her in any of their remaining classes. His eyes even refused to drift in her direction, and she wasn’t coming any closer to getting a feel for his thoughts. Every time she attempted, Holly was met by the mysterious barrier, which more or less resembled a dense and clearly impenetrable grey cloud, and this only served to send a tickle of dread down her spine, a knot working its way into her heart.

Further, this sensation only increased when the girl noticed Titania and Solaris popping up at random intervals throughout the morning and afternoon, showing a very unusual interest in her. Each time they made excuses for their presence, but Holly wasn’t fooled. They were checking up on her, and while she was flattered by the attention, it was really starting to get on her nerves.

And even the thrill of Ancient Runes couldn’t quite alleviate the tightening in her chest and her growing sense of frustration.

The course was interesting in itself, even if they wouldn’t be getting to the really good stuff for some time. They did have to cover the basics first after all, which meant that they had to learn entirely new “alphabets”, for lack of a better term, before they could do anything else. They were starting off with Egyptian Runes, and if they progressed at a good pace through the year, Professor Rosetta promised that they would begin Norse and Celtic before the summer.

Their teacher herself was a peculiar woman with squared-framed glasses that sat on the end of her nose, and her brown hair was held together in a messy bun by two shortened quills. Like Vector, she was rather young seeming and obviously passionate about her chosen field, but the two women drastically differed from that point on.

Rosetta was adventurous, eager to try something new or different, as indicated by the variety of pictures on her wall that depicted her doing various bizarre activities. However, that trait was offset by her extreme forgetfulness. Truthfully, she fit the mould of the absentminded professor so well that Holly secretly suspected it was actually based on her in the first place, especially after she spent five minutes searching for her glasses before realising that she was already wearing them.

All told and in all honesty, she reminded the Slytherin of an odd cross between Dumbledore and Flitwick.

The rest of the day passed in a blur after Ancient Runes, and the next was a strained affair. Still, at least Blaise was speaking to her again by then.

His mind was almost back to the way it normally was, but the strange cloud-thing had not disappeared entirely, merely shrinking and moving. Now, it was located around an area of his thoughts that she tended to avoid anyway, a place he had asked her never to venture. She had kept her promise not to, now coming to regret that decision.

Further, every time she even hinted to what had happened the day previous, he either hastily changed the subject or ignored her until she stopped. Draco and Luna were equally puzzled by his behaviour, as were Tom and Sirius, not to mention all the rest of their friends. Unfortunately, they had their minds on other things, namely on plotting revenge against Ron Weasley, so they weren't much help to Holly in figuring out what was going on. Draco especially had a deadly gleam in his eyes as he schemed, making Holly wonder if she really wanted to know beforehand what he had in mind.

Thursday rolled around, and it started out seeming a repeat of the previous day. Yet, Potions class quickly put an end to any entertaining of that notion.

Draco was mysteriously absent when they arrived, and he didn't show up until halfway through the lesson, appearing much like the lone survivor of some horrendous battle.

Strangely, enough their Head of House did not berate the blond for his tardiness, which led Holly to believe that he was in on the whole mess. Though for all she knew, it could have been his plan in the first place. After all, he had been less than pleased when one of his Serpents had been skewered by a hippogriff.

However, as Holly found out later, her friend had in reality been with Madam Pomfrey as a follow-up. It was pure coincidence on the nurse's part that she had wanted to see him first thing.

As it were, Draco ended up at a table with Holly and Blaise, who was being mostly amicable that morning, seated behind Ron and Parvati with Hermione and Neville diagonal from them. The blond set up his cauldron next to Holly, but he didn't even bother going further than obtaining his ingredients, not that he could do much else with his dominant hand out of commission.

Spotting this problem, she immediately turned to prepare his potion for him.

"No, Hols, watch this." He smirked darkly, shaking his head and placing his free hand over her own. Draco promptly turned, raising his voice.

"Sir, sir, I'll need help cutting these daisy root because of my arm. It would be unfair for poor Holly to do it since she is so busy with her own potion."

Snape didn't even look up from where he was checking over Daphne and Cynthia's cauldron. "Weasley, I believe you are currently unoccupied. Cut up Mr. Malfoy's roots for him."

Ron, who had been merely watching Parvati do all the work, started.

"There's nothing wrong with your arm," he hissed, half-turning around, his face reddening.

The Slytherin just chuckled at him. "Weasley, you heard Professor Snape; cut up these roots," he drawled in a very condensing tone, sliding his ingredient across the table. He casually watched as the

redhead snatched them, chopping them furiously and making them completely different sizes.

“Professor, Weasley is mutilating my roots.”

The Potions master glided over to them like a malevolent bat, glaring down his nose at the Gryffindor and giving him a smile full of malice. “Change roots with Mr. Malfoy.”

Ron sputtered, even as Parvati stiffened beside him, shooting him an enraged look as she had just finished carefully shredding their own roots into even pieces. She whacked the redhead across the hand with her stirring rod as he handed them over, leaving an angry streak.

Professor Snape pretended that he hadn't noticed, dark eyes gleaming.

From beside Draco, Holly and Blaise watched the disaster unfold, trying not to snigger as it did. They were now more interested in the drama before them than their own potion, which was thankfully finished, bubbling happily nearby.

The blond shot them an amused glance as he opened his mouth again. “And, sir,” he added, “I need this shrivelfig skinned.” He subtly placed his hand over his mouth, all he could do to stop himself from bursting out with laughter.

“Weasley, you can skin Mr. Malfoy's shrivelfig as well.” The Potions master gave the Gryffindor the look of loathing he had once reserved for James Potter alone. “And do try to be more careful this time. We wouldn't want for you to injure yourself in the process... or for you to earn a week's worth of detention for carelessness,” he finished in a silky and very venomous tone.

The boy gulped, a shaky hand reaching for the shrivelfig and almost dropping it on Parvati. She snarled at him before returning to her work, attempting damage control on the daisy roots her partner had mangled.

Professor Snape lingered for a few moments, watching with satisfaction as Ron carefully worked before sweeping off to berate

Neville. The round-faced boy had been too busy watching the redhead to pay attention to his own potion, which was now a menacing shade of reddish orange in spite of the extra ingredients Hermione added in an attempt to fix it.

Draco just observed everything with silent glee, ducking as Weasley launched the shrivelfig skin at his head.

Thankfully, Holly snatched it before it could do any damage, setting it down on their table. She and Blaise shot the redhead angry glares, but he didn't notice since he was too busy focusing on Parvati, who was hissing at him. The Gryffindor girl was also shaking with unsuppressed fury, a thing that had only manifested after Ron had knocked their diced juniper to the floor when he had thrown the skin.

"Weasley," Draco called then, distracting the boy further, "slice my caterpillars for me, would you?"

Ron bit back a retort as their teacher's gaze flashed to him, grabbing the blasted things and fiercely dicing them. His furious motions only increased as Draco leaned over to whisper to him, casually mentioning the complainants his father had already lodged. Ron's face purpled, and he viciously sliced at the caterpillars, decapitating one in his ire. Its head rolled over to the daisy roots Parvati was still repairing, landing in the middle of them. She exhaled heavily, eye twitching as she flicked it right back at him, pegging him in the ear.

Automatically, he twirled to face Draco, despite the fact that the blond couldn't have possibly done it. Ron's hands waved wildly through the air as he turned to berate the Slytherin, knocking into the carnation essence and sending it flying. As his luck would have it, the bottle was uncapped, and the contents splashed onto Parvati's chest before the bottle fell to the floor, shattering completely.

The girl's eyes darted from the lightening spot on the front of her robes to her broken vial to her partner and back. The redhead, however, didn't see it, too busy snipping at Draco to notice his fellow Gryffindor go white with fury. She just growled then, balling her hands into fists. Her wrath was nearly palpable, and Holly could practically see the wheels turn in the other girl's head as her eyes landed on their potion.

Without further thought, Parvati reached for their cauldron, unceremoniously upturning its contents on Ron's head. The cauldron hit the ground with a loud clang, and Professor Snape whirled around, eyes bugging out at the scene before him.

Parvati's hands were on her hips, pinkish splotch prominent on her robes, her cauldron lying on its side by her feet amidst shards of broken glass. Ron was standing in a puddle of potion, wiping at the substance that was still dripping down his face and managing to fling some of it onto the tabletop. In spite of the fact that they were supposedly working on a Shrinking solution, his skin was now bright green, making him look like a gargantuan frog in a red wig.

Of course, this probably had something to do with the fact that their potion had only consisted of three ingredients.

"Weasley!" the Potions master all but shouted, striding up to them. "What is the meaning of this! I will not stand for this kind of carelessness!" He furiously pointed at the now cowering boy. "You--"

The bell rang then, and there was a mad scramble to exit as quickly as humanly possible. Even though, several people really wanted to see Ron verbally eviscerated by the Slytherin Head of House, they were weary of staying. There was too much of a chance that the man's rage would then turn to them.

As such, most fled to the door and down the corridor. A few dragged along, listening to Snape's shouts.

Draco lingered by the still opened doorway for a moment, nodding regally at Parvati. She inclined her head in return, her arms crossed over her chest and her head held high, a very Slytherin-esque smirk on her face. The blond merely chuckled to himself at that and smirked with satisfaction as he rejoined his friends.

AN: Oh, an important note. The fact that Blaise could block Holly was intentional on my part and will come into play later on. Also, there will be a more in depth discussion of Ancient Runes spaced over the next few chapters. You will actually get to meet Professor Rosetta then.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Thirty: Complicated Confrontations

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Thirty: Complicated Confrontations

There were only two things that people talked about the next few days. The first was the incident in Potions, a fact which had Ron alternating between mortification and anger every time it was mentioned. It was obvious that he wanted nothing more than to rant and rave about the incident, but he always thought the better of it when he recalled the month of detention he had earned from Professor Snape. Rumour had it that his punishment was for drenching himself with his own potion, which would explain why Parvati had gotten away with only a small dressing down. Of course, perhaps the Potions master just figured that being partnered with Weasley for the rest of the year was punishment enough.

The other hot topic of the week didn't actually occur until Thursday, and it dealt with the third-year Gryffindors yet again, though this time Ron was not actually involved. That in itself was surprising, especially given the redhead's recent string of back luck, but then, it also wasn't considering that Neville Longbottom was in the same class. Truthfully, Holly never could get the full story as even Fred and George couldn't tell it without bursting into laughter, practically wetting themselves. Remus refused to tell her when she had tea with him, merely smiling secretly with a very Dumbledore-esque twinkle in his eyes and changing the subject. In the end, all she knew was that it involved another Boggart, her Head of House, and something about Neville's grandmother.

Regardless or maybe because of it, Professor Lupin was gaining popularity rather quickly. Even the Slytherins seemed to like him, in spite of his shabby appearance, most secretly finding Neville's Boggart hilarious. That was quite an accomplishment given their attitude in general when it came to Defence professors, or perhaps they were all just having flashbacks to Lockhart. As it were, the subject became everyone's favourite in no time at all.

The rest of September went by in a flash afterwards. Holly started visiting Remus much like she occasionally did with Professor Flitwick, though it was an even more casual affair. They had tea every Monday afternoon, and she would often pop in to say hello during the week. Their discussions were much like their letters, but it was odd in

the beginning to talk to him face to face. However, that feeling soon faded away, though Holly did catch him eyeing her strangely a few times when he thought she wasn't looking.

He actually invited her friends to join them on a few occasions, but Luna was the only one who consistently took him up on the offer. She sat through their conversations in her usual fashion, staring off into space and randomly mentioning this or that bizarre thing. Draco came with her twice and actually seemed to enjoy himself both times, but he never went more than that as he wasn't overly fond of werewolves. Holly suspected that the blond had decided that her talks with Remus were a private thing and only came to check up on her, assuring himself that nothing untoward was happening. The green-eyed girl knew better than to ask Blaise, and everyone else was content to let her be on her own.

Sirius, of course, knew about her little get-togethers with his old friend, and he seemed rather pleased by them. But that wasn't to say that the Animagus was completely thrilled. He always twitched strangely whenever Remus was mentioned, but Holly merely attributed that to the fact that the professor still thought Sirius a mass murderer. Yet, every time she even alluded to bringing her teacher into the fold, she was met with vehement refusals. On the bright side, he did agree to tell her other friends, though they just couldn't seem to find the right moment to do so.

Other than that, things were well with Sirius. He was still recovering from his stint in Azkaban, filling out with all the food that they were bringing him. Further, he was also becoming even more cheerful as time progressed, the shadows of his imprisonment leaving a little more each day, and Tom and he sometimes spent time together while the others were in class. Though, for the life of her, Holly had no idea what the two could possibly be doing.

Tom didn't just stay with Sirius during the day though. In actuality, he was usually reading books his friends either owned or had smuggled from the library. For the most part, he researched various topics, including his own entrapment within the diary, possible ways for Sirius to untransfigure himself, and the summoning ritual for Samhain. The current plan was use the room across from Sirius' in the

passageways since they wouldn't be disturbed there. The Animagus himself wouldn't be present for the occasion, despite Holly's numerous invitations. He merely shook his head after each one, saying that she deserved private time with her parents.

Lessons during that time were interesting to say the least. Trelawney continued to predict Holly's death at random intervals, managing to entertain her students during almost every class with her dramatics. Unfortunately, she was beginning to sound a bit like a broken record around the third time she brought up the Grim, and Theo and Milli had taken to questioning all her predictions rather snidely in recompense.

Hagrid's class, on the other hand, had become exceedingly dull after the first action-packed lesson. He seemed to have lost his nerve, teaching about nothing more interesting than flobberworms. Of course, that might have had something to do with the official inquiry Lucius Malfoy had put forth, but it wasn't as if anyone really complained about the change. After all, the Slytherins didn't fancy being skewered or in any way harmed like their Housemate had been. Draco, in turn, took events rather well, only occasionally making sarcastic comments. Honestly, Holly supposed that he might be a bit skittish of doing anything more than that. Hagrid hadn't liked him to begin with, and the large man wasn't exactly his biggest fan at the moment.

Arithmancy and Ancient Runes more than made up for the disappointment of her other new classes, however. Professor Rosetta was no less enthused by her subject in her subsequent lessons than she had been in the first, and her eagerness was rather contagious, spreading easily to her students. They were now truly immersed in the subject, moving beyond the basics and the proper ways to construct runes and venturing into the actual meaning of what they were doing.

Professor Vector was less visibly excited by her field, but she made it no less fascinating. She had been especially pleased by the quizzes that they had handed in, which apparently showed that they were up to snuff ability wise, and had immediately started them on memorising the various theorems they would need to know. Afterwards, she had

let them get more of a feel for the material, having them calculate the basic values for their own birthdates and names before adding on additional variables. From there, their teacher promised that they would soon get into the mathematical construction of spells, actually taking apart several of them by the end of term.

The only true downside of her extra classes was her repeated use of the Time Turner, which she hadn't really exploited for anything other than school. Holly often felt tired in the beginning, and she had actually started going back several hours to get more sleep. Additionally, she had used it to finish her homework, something that would no doubt give both Hermione and McGonagall aneurysms if they ever found out. Though, honestly, they would probably have the same reaction if they ever knew half of what Holly and her friends did.

The Slytherins resumed their independent study the second week of school, in spite of the fact that Defence was going so well. In all honesty, it had become readily apparent by then that they were far ahead of Remus' lesson plans, well into fourth year material. Besides, it gave them an opportunity to spend time together as group, and with that in mind, they had just decided to continue learning on their own, soon branching out into other subjects. Now, the Slytherins and their two token Ravenclaws worked on their various assignments together, practicing everything from transfiguring flowers into pillows to charming each other's hair various colours. Tom soon joined in their lessons, giving them invaluable tips and teaching them a variety of interesting spells. He was especially invaluable since he had a sixth-year's magical knowledge with all his years of studying added in.

While the time was well spent and generally enjoyable, there was also a slight tension to the air. Blaise had been in a peculiar mood since the first week back, and it had only continued as time went on. He was unusually quiet and withdrawn, the strange fog still present in his mind. He had also taken to spending time by himself, refusing even Holly's company and hiding out in his dormitory when he wanted to be left alone. His friends were obviously confused and worried by his behaviour, but there wasn't really anything they could do. He rebuffed them every time they tried to find out what was wrong. Holly just let him go as he was, giving him the courtesy of not pushing and waiting for when he was ready.

Regardless, she couldn't help but be concerned, and the girl had even gone to Sirius for advice on the situation. The Animagus wasn't certain himself, suggesting that perhaps something had happened with the boy's family or maybe he just didn't like the fact that she was spending so much time with Remus or possibly it was something else entirely. This did little to ease her worries, but it did at least give her something to work with. She knew for a fact that Blaise didn't like werewolves; she just didn't know why.

As all things are wont to do, Holly's troubles only increased as time went on. By the third week of school, her Mind Magic was again acting up, just like it had over the summer. Her telekinesis once more took on a mind of its own, moving various things at odd times. Thankfully, her year-mates had managed to cover the slip-ups for the most part, using their wands to stop any and all flying objects. Nevertheless, there were several close calls, including one in Transfiguration that Milli ended up earning a detention for when she pretended that it was her fault. Luna was repeatedly questioned about this occurrence, but the Ravenclaw merely shrugged and blinked her too large eyes in response. Yet, there was a shrewd cast to her face, making Holly believe that the younger girl at least had a theory.

Moreover, Titania and Solaris continued their Holly watch, often aided and abetted by the other Prefects. By this point, it had become more than annoying, but it wasn't like the third-year could tell them off or anything.

To add insult to injury, the Gryffindor trio was once again trying to get into her good graces. This led Holly to avoid all common areas for the most part and stick to the dungeons, lest she desire to hear about yet another attempt by Crookshanks to eat Ron's rat, Scabbers. Unfortunately, she couldn't completely shake Hermione, who was in both Arithmancy and Divination with her and who insisted that they use their Time Turners together.

Luckily, there was some good news interspersed with the bad. Draco's sling came off at the beginning of October, though his arm still had a noticeable gash. It ached occasionally, but he vehemently denied it whenever asked. Despite that, the blond still managed to

land a spot on the Quidditch team, easily beating out the Elgin Urquhart and taking Adrian Pucey's old Chaser spot.

Regrettably, their Keeper resigned to focus on his NEWTs, but he was easily replaced by Mordecai Montague, a reserve Chaser. Further, Matthew Derrick's parents had forced him to quit the team due to his falling grades, and Constantine Warrington, another reserve player, filled his position. Marcus Flint was back again as their captain, having finally recovered from his severe bout of Dragon Pox, repeating his seventh year since he had missed school from December to June, but hopefully, he would be able to make it all the way through this time.

Better still, the first match was scheduled the next to last weekend in the month. But even here, they ran into problems. The week before the match, the Gryffindor Seeker was in the Hospital Wing with a bad case of Goblin Flu, and Devon was still recovering the Monday before the game. As such, McGonagall decided that it would be best if Hufflepuff played Slytherin instead, despite the fact that Draco had a lingering injury.

The days leading up to the match came in similar fashion, filled with even more troubles and quite a bit of rain. It stormed the entire week, making the ground look like a muddy and sodden mess. Additionally, Titania and Solaris finally managed to corner Holly in the Common Room, and she was only saved by a passing Theo. To make things even worse, certain biological functions made themselves known that week, ones she only had fleeting cause to consider before. Fortunately, Madam Pomfrey and the female Prefects had discussed the matter with them back in first year, which had been a faintly embarrassing thing then, but she was more than grateful for it now.

That Saturday dawned dreary, rain pouring from the sky in bucketfuls. Holly cast a nifty little charm on her glasses to make them impervious to water, and Titania went around spelling everyone's Quidditch robes to do the same. After a rousing speech by Flint, they headed out onto the pitch, instantly grateful for the magic that kept them relatively dry. The Hufflepuff team had stepped out only moments before, and they were already drenched.

Holly mounted her broom, her hands sliding over the slickened edges. Nearby, the other Seeker, Cedric Diggory, seemed to be having the same problem, and he flashed her a grim smile. She gave a small nod in return before looking away, and she allowed her eyes to rove over the stands as she waited for Madam Hooch to arrive. Through the rain, she could just barely make out her friends, who were all sitting together in a large group. Milli was in the centre, an open diary barely visible from its position under her cloak. Luna was squished in next to the older Slytherin, little Snuffles' head poking out from between her hands. Both Tom and Sirius had wanted to watch the match, but this was the best that they could do for them as things were.

Just then, the referee stomped out onto the pitch, distracting the Slytherin Seeker. She watched as the witch released the Snitch and Bludgers, rain pelting her on the top of her head. The wind whipped across the ground, pulling at her robes and doing its best to shove her to the ground. She resisted though, barely managing to keep in place. There was a flash in the sky that suspiciously looked like lightening, and Holly glanced up to the ever darkening sky and cocked her head to the side. However, she didn't hear a corresponding crash of thunder, not that she even could over the noise from the stands.

Her hair was soaked by this point, and she could feel a faint trickle of moisture through her robes, the charms Titania had cast apparently not being able to withstand the sheer volume of water. The girl felt a chill shoot up her spine, a shiver following in its wake as Madam Hooch put her whistle in her mouth, and she had a sudden pang of foreboding in the back of her mind. At the edge of her mental senses, she could feel a creeping and twisting presence.

She had a very bad feeling about this.

Sometime later, Holly opened her eyes, blinking slowly. She was aching all over, but her shoulders and back seemed to bear the brunt of it, making her eyes cross as she shifted her position. She was lying down on her side, but it wasn't the ceiling or the wall that she saw. Instead, a bizarre, brownish blur hovered in front of her face,

obscuring everything else around her. She blinked again, the image not clearing in the slightest, and she belatedly realised that she wasn't wearing her glasses. In the background, she heard a din of voices, but they were faint and undistinguishable. She attempted to move her hand then, but she just couldn't seem to do it. There was a strange weight on it, and she only managed to make her fingers twitch. Holly tried again, failing once more. It hit her then just what was going on.

Someone was holding her hand.

She made a soft noise in the back of her throat at this realisation, and then, the surface of her bed distended a bit as something hopped across, coming from somewhere near her stomach and moving right next to her chin. A furry face popped into view, two large bluish-silver eyes staring at her. There was a happy mew before the kitten promptly sneezed directly in her face.

"Ug... Snuffles," Holly murmured, "that was disgusting."

He mewed again, this one sounding rather pitiful and high-pitched. He turned and batted at the brownish blob from earlier. There was a sudden snort from beside her, and the blur disappeared out of sight.

Someone groaned.

"What, Snuffles? What's the mat--" a male voice sleepily said before abruptly stopping. "Holly?"

A moment passed, and there was the sound of movement off to her side. In the background, the voices instantly silenced. However, she distinctly heard several people step forward.

"Here," someone softly whispered in her ear, gently pushing something onto her face.

Instantly, the world came into focus, and Holly slowly gazed up, looking directly into the worried face of Blaise. His eyes were red rimmed, looking like he had been crying recently. Both Draco and Luna were hovering just beyond his shoulder, watching her with very strained expressions.

"Hello," the brunet said, smiling at her and helping her sit up. "How do you feel?" He took her hand again.

Her eyes flickered around, noting that she was in the Hospital Wing and that all her friends were present. "Er... confused. What happen--"

But she never managed to finish the question as it suddenly all came back to her in a flash. The Slytherin groaned as she recalled just what had happened.

Dementors... there had been Dementors at the match, and she had been affected just like she had on the train. Only this time, she had fallen off her broom, fainting half-way to the ground.

Blaise's concern seemed to have multiplied, but it was Draco who asked, "Are you all right?"

"Just remembering." Holly rubbed a tired hand over her face. "I recall falling, but..."

"Oh," Luna inserted, "Dumbledore. He used some sort of spell to slow you down."

"You still hit the ground hard enough to break your glasses," Blaise murmured, eyes suspiciously bright. "We thought you'd died." He stared at her in silence for a moment.

Something tugged at her mind in that instant, pulling at her fiercely and unerringly towards him, and it felt like a band of steel encircled her heart, contracting painfully. Holly took in a shaky breath, having the sudden urge to throw her arms around him and never let go, and she barely managed to keep the feeling contained as she gazed at him, her chest now constricted further.

"And the others?" Holly asked hoarsely, trying to distract him. She gave his hand a hard squeeze, a jolt shooting through her brain. Her chest was still tight, making it feel like a weight had settled down on it.

"They're all fine," Milli put in from nearby, and Holly twisted to look at her. "Madam Pomfrey just refused to let them in. She said there were too many of us as it is."

“Flint did want to congratulate you on your excellent catch, though,” Theo added with a genuine grin, trying to ease the situation further.

Holly’s heart gave a strange flutter.

Draco nodded heartily. “It was almost like the Snitch flew into your hand.” He paused for a second, a sheepish expression crossing his face. “Though, he’s really sorry about your broom.”

Holly, meanwhile, was doing her best not to smirk, but she faltered for a moment after hearing the last part of what her friend had said.

“What?” Milli asked before the other girl could say anything, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. “What is it?”

However, Holly had a mental flash of Madam Pomfrey and brushed off the question. “Nothing. I’ll tell you later.”

Draco opened his mouth to ask her further, but the nurse came out of her office then. She bustled over to them, waving the various students out of her way as she strode over to Holly’s bed.

“Out!” Madam Pomfrey ordered as she handed the girl some form of Healing draught. “Everyone out! She needs her rest. We can’t have you lot hang about all evening.”

Holly sniffed the orange potion sceptically. “Can they please stay for a while?” she asked, green eyes looking up at the nurse. The Slytherin really didn’t want to be left alone right now, not with the slowly increasing tension in her chest.

Madam Pomfrey frowned and glanced around, glaring down her nose at the children, who were watching her with hopeful looks. Her eyes narrowed distinctly, especially when she noticed just how many of them there were. Nevertheless, her expression softened as she returned her gaze to Holly’s pleading face, and she sighed lightly.

“Just one,” she allowed, “and only one.” The woman sniffed. “And take your potion.”

Holly allowed a small smile before downing the liquid, her grin transforming into a grimace. "Disgusting," she muttered, the warm potion leaving a peculiar aftertaste. Fortunately, she did notice that the aching in her back and shoulders began to ease, though the band around her heart remained.

Madam Pomfrey took the offered vial back. "Healing potions usually taste foul, but that only means they're working properly. And Professor Snape brewed this one especially for you." The ends of her mouth quirked for a moment, but she soon came back to herself. "All right then, out with you." She made a gesture of dismissal and waited with her hands on her hips as they all traded glances.

Theo looked at Holly then Blaise, eyes flickering between them for a moment. He finally nodded and rose from his seat, heading for the door and telling her goodbye. It was like the dam broke after that, her friends each standing and giving their own farewells. Milli went to grab Snuffles, but he darted from her hands, jumping to the floor and racing to a nearby bed. His little head poked out from under it, watching the heavy-set girl wearily.

"Leave him," Holly said before Milli could go to retrieve him. "He'll be fine staying with me for the night."

The other girl paused and nodded, and a second later, everyone headed for the door... everyone save Blaise. The caramel-skinned boy remained seated, his hand still holding Holly's. She, in turn, watched her friends leave, Luna giving her a reassuring mental pat as she disappeared from sight. Draco gave a jaunty little wave with his right hand, and she suddenly wondered what he had meant by that comment about her broom.

Madam Pomfrey nodded with satisfaction and bustled off, shooting the two remaining Slytherins a look as she left. Snuffles stepped out from under the bed, turning to gaze at the pair. He eyed them for a moment before giving them a little kitten smile and running after the nurse. Holly just watched him go with confusion.

"I'm sorry," Blaise blurted out suddenly.

She blinked, heart twinging faintly. "About?" she asked, scooting over and patting the spot beside her. The girl had a feeling that this would take a while.

"I'm sorry that I've been a total git lately. I really am. I just... I've had some problems," he admitted, watching her uncertainly for a moment.

Holly patted the spot beside her again, and the boy shifted onto the bed to sit next to her. She remained silent, letting him talk at his own pace, but the quiet stretched even further, minutes passing until he finally spoke again.

"I know that you've been wondering why I dislike Lupin," Blaise began, staring off at the far wall. "And it's not what you think."

Her heart twinged again. "Oh?" the girl asked simply.

He nodded. "It's not because I'm prejudice against his **kind**." Blaise paused. "Well, maybe it is, but there's a reason behind it."

Holly wasn't really sure what to say to that, merely settling for making a noncommittal sound in the back of her throat. "What reason?" she finally croaked out, chest aching almost painfully.

He didn't say anything for a long time. "It has to do with my father... my birth one." The boy clenched his hands into fists and squeezed his eyes shut. "It has to do with how he... with how he died."

It was like a light flashed on in her head.

"No," Holly whispered with horror, eyes impossibly wide. "No. You can't mean--"

He gave a bitter sound, trembling beneath her fingertips. "Yeah, I do mean that." Blaise let out a shaky breath. "He was killed by them... by those **things**! And you want me to be friends with one. To like the damned beast, but I won't do it!" He shook his head. "I can't."

"I... Blaise..." she trailed off, having no idea what to say, not knowing how to fix this at all. Holly just gaped at him, for once not having a

clue what to do. Her chest constricted to the breaking point, but it suddenly eased when he finally spoke again.

"When you fell during the match I thought..." He tensed. "I don't want to lose you, not over this," he said, opening his eyes and facing her. "But I refuse to spend a minute more with that thing than absolutely necessary."

"You won't," she assured him breathlessly. "I just... I didn't know."

He snorted, sounding more like his normal self. "Of course, you didn't. How could you? Almost nobody knows, not even Draco." Blaise unclenched his fist, turning his hand over in hers. "Maker, I don't think even Dumbledore knows."

"Humph." She rolled her eyes, tension leaving her chest. "I think that man knows just about everything that goes on in this school... and Britain, for that manner."

Blaise chuckled then, just once, but it was enough. "Still, I'm sorry about everything. There's no way you could have known, and I was too much of a git to explain." He squeezed her hand once more, the band on her heart loosening even further.

"It's fine," she replied. "I understand completely, and I'm sorry for not realising something sooner."

He waved her apology away. "It's not your fault. Don't worry about it, and look..." He hesitated, taking a deep breath. "You can be...**friends** with him if you want," he stated, looking very pained to even allow that. "I recommend that you don't, but I refuse to have anything to do with him. And please don't tell anyone about... you know."

"You're the best friend I've ever had. I can trust you with anything, and you can trust me." Holly assured him, "I won't tell anyone if you don't want me to."

He nodded and watched her for a moment. Blaise seemed like he wanted to say something else, a bizarre expression flashing across

his face, but apparently, he thought the better of it. His mouth snapped closed, and he settled for merely looking at her.

“Thank you, Hols. Thanks... for understanding,” he finally said, eyes very bright.

However, she had the strange feeling that he was thanking her for something else... something else entirely.

Holly was released from the Hospital Wing the next morning amid much celebration on her part. She had no desire to spend another night. Things hadn't been too terrible since Blaise had stayed well past curfew, the nurse practically throwing him out on his ear after she had discovered that he was still there, but Holly still didn't want to do it again. At least, the two of them had had the chance to talk more, clearing the air further, and the tightness in her chest had all but disappeared by the time he departed, leaving her breathing easier than she had in a month.

Of course, not everything was sunshine and daisies, especially not after Draco had let it slip that her broom had been destroyed by the Whomping Willow. As such, her chipper mood had plummeted, and Holly scowled on her way back to the dorms, her blond escort jogging to keep up with her.

“I'm really sorry, Holly,” he said, finally managing to catch up by the first floor. “I thought that Blaise told you last night.”

“No,” she responded testily, dragonhide boots clicking on the stone beneath them. “He neglected to mention it.”

The grey-eyed boy sniffed. “Well, what did you talk about that then?”

“Other things... like my incredible catch yesterday,” she deflected readily.

“Oh, yes.” Draco brightened immediately. “That was incredible. Simply smashing. You should have seen the Hufflepuffs' expressions when the blasted thing flew into your hand, especially Diggory's. He looked like he had just taken a Bludger to the face. Of course, you

probably missed that since you... er... fell right after that.” He guiltily looked at her in remembrance of the Dementors. “Still, it was rather fantastic.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” Holly smirked, her eyes glinting mysteriously. She mentally felt around for other people. There wasn’t even a portrait nearby, so she knew it was safe to tell him. Besides, it would make him completely forget about Blaise.

The blond looked at her shrewdly then. “You did something. I know it.” He leaned down. “What did you do, Holly?”

Holly gazed up at him, the ends of her mouth quirking up. “Well, I sort of summoned it telekinetically,” she whispered, barely even moving her mouth. “The Dementors were there, and I wasn’t really thinking very clearly. It just hap--”

The blond’s mouth dropped open. “You cheated!” Draco responded with shock, his eyes very wide. Nonetheless, he looked incredibly impressed.

“Shh... not so loud,” she replied, quieting him. Holly looked around before dragging him into an unused classroom, shutting the door behind them. “And technically, I didn’t cheat.”

“You have to explain that one because it flew right by me,” her Housemate said, his eyes resuming their normal shape. He crossed his arms over his chest, foot tapping as he waited for her answer.

She exhaled slowly. “Nowhere in the Quidditch handbook does it say that it’s illegal to use Mind Magic.”

“But... I mean, how?” he asked incredulously. “How did you even know where it was to begin with?”

Her face twitched ever-so-slightly. “You remember what I did with the rogue Bludger last year.”

He nodded.

“Well, I sort of tracked the Snitch like I did the Bludger.” Holly felt another person approaching then and stiffened, but she eased when she recognised that it was only Luna.

“Tracked it?” Draco repeated with amazement, redirecting her thoughts. “So what did you do? Found where it was and then just flew around until you felt like catching it?”

“I couldn’t get it too quickly,” she explained, returning her attention to him fully. “It would be suspicious, and it is not like I can quit the team or anything. That would be even more suspicious, and I can’t afford to attract that kind of attention to myself. It’s bad enough that I am watched almost all the time as it is.”

He just gaped at her, shaking his head mutely. Draco opened his mouth and then promptly shut it. Holly felt a trickle shoot down her spine, tilting her head to the side as she felt Luna’s mental greeting. The door to the classroom opened then, and the boy whirled around. However, he heaved a sigh of relief as their friend stepped inside.

“Hello, Luna,” Draco greeted cheerfully, but his face fell when he noticed her expression. “What’s wrong?”

The second-year twirled her hair with one finger. “Nothing’s wrong per se. Besides the pixies that keep stealing my quills, that is.”

“What is it then?” the dark-haired Slytherin asked, worry in her voice. She brushed Luna’s mind, but that only served to confuse her even more.

“It’s about you, Holly,” the other girl responded, “and what’s been going on with your Mind Magic lately.”

“And?” Draco questioned, stepping closer.

Luna sighed. “I think that I know what’s going on, but I’m fully prepared to be wrong with this.”

The other two exchanged glances, their eyes instantly returning to her, and the Ravenclaw fidgeted with the sleeve of her lurid purple dress.

“I think... no, I **know** that Blaise is...”

“Is what?” Holly prompted, wondering what this had to do with anything.

The other girl looked at her solemnly. “Blaise is your bonded.”

There were approximately three seconds of stunned silence before...

“What?” both Slytherins all but shouted together.

Holly blinked repeatedly, trying to fathom what Luna had just said. Draco, in turn, tapped a finger over each ear, making sure that he had heard correctly.

“He’s your bonded,” Luna repeated. And when they just gaped at her blankly, she explained, “It’s a Mind Mage thing. The more powerful ones need someone to stabilise them, especially when they’re young and still coming into their powers. They bond to someone – usually a parent or an older relative – and this person sort of acts as a balance for their abilities.” She sighed, taking in their faces. “I don’t think I am explaining this very well. You see, my dad is my bonded, and my connection to him keeps me grounded in reality.”

Someone snorted, but she couldn’t be sure who it was.

“His mind acts like an anchor for mine,” Luna clarified carefully, “keeping my powers in check. Holly, you have a similar link to Blaise. You just didn’t realise it for what it is.”

Draco nodded thoughtfully, actually seeming to take the explanation rather well. “But why Blaise?” He rubbed a hand over his chin. “She didn’t meet him until right before Hogwarts. Granted, she’s still young, but you make it sound like this thing is supposed to start when you’re a baby.” He glanced at Holly, but she wasn’t paying any attention.

The Slytherin girl had an expression of complete surprise on her face, her mind racing as quickly as it ever had. Suddenly, everything had become crystal clear. She finally understood everything she had wondered about since she had first met Blaise: why they had become close so quickly, why he was so protective and affectionate, why he

was so sensitive to her needs and moods. Why he knew her better than she knew herself.

It all made perfect sense now.

Holly was so wrapped up in her revelation that she almost missed Luna's reply to Draco.

"It usually does, but Holly didn't have anyone worthy of bonding before then," the Ravenclaw replied. "Bond-mates have to be trustworthy and reliable, someone who you can depend on completely."

Holly finally snapped back to herself at that statement, actually sniffing disdainfully and hugging her arms to herself. "The Dursleys certainly don't fit that description," she muttered, eyes partially glazed over. "What about my parents? I mean, surely, they..."

Luna looked at her mournfully. "You can be bonded to more than one person, especially if your first is incapacitated or... if they die."

"Oh." Holly rubbed at her temples, really starting to believe that this was true. "Is this why my abilities have gone all wonky? Since he's been closed off to me?"

"Yes."

"And during the summer?" Holly continued, seeing Luna nod, "I don't understand. I mean, what about you? What about when you're away at school? I haven't seen your father coming to visit you any."

"He doesn't need to," the Ravenclaw said softly. "I can be away from him for months at a time without a problem because we've been connected so long. I don't need a stabiliser as much, and our link can stretch even over the distance between us." She stepped closer to her friend, patting her arm gently. "Your connection with Blaise is strong, probably stronger than the one I have with my dad, but it hasn't had a chance to mature. Not to mention that you're more powerful than me and have gone without someone for years."

Draco laid his hand on his Housemate's shoulder. "So how does this happen? How does the bond form?" he asked.

But something occurred to Holly in that moment, and she started. "I didn't force him into this did I?"

"No," Luna hastily inserted. "He has to accept the bond, even if he doesn't realise that's what he was doing. It was probably gradual in the beginning because you had to be certain of him. You had to trust him first, trust that he would look out for you, and it was sort of unconscious from then on." She paused, looking at the lone boy with sad eyes. "You didn't bond with Draco because of the fight you two had your first year, and by the time Tom and I came along, you already had a strong connection with Blaise. You have ones with us also, just not the same kind."

"I just..." Holly trailed off, breathing out loudly, wondering why this sort of thing always happened to her. "Well, this does explain a great deal," she allowed, realising that it really did. So many of the peculiar things that had been happening since the summer now made complete and total sense in light of this new revelation.

"It does," Draco commented, "but what about Tom? Does he know?"

"I don't think so," Luna stated, blinking up at the ceiling. "He seemed to have been in a similar situation as Holly was with the Dursleys. It's possible that he never bonded at all, a very bad thing actually."

Holly added, "And Blaise? He obviously doesn't know about this."

Luna inclined her head. "That's why I told you first, Holly. He really doesn't know. You have to tell him."

"What are you going to do, Holly?" Draco asked, slight breathless. "How are you ever going to explain this?"

She just shook her head, horror beginning to sink in. How exactly would she explain this? How would she tell Blaise that she had basically tied them together without meaning to? Possibly for their entire lives?

This was bad. This was very bad.

She turned to look at her friends, who were watching her with guarded eyes. "I have no idea."

AN: I know that in canon Halloween came before the Quidditch match, but it works better for me if it comes afterwards.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Thirty-One: Grim Mistakes

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Thirty-One: Grim Mistakes

Halloween dawned overcast but warm, and Holly walked to the Great Hall with Draco, her mind still whirling from the revelation Luna had dropped on her. For the past week, Holly felt beyond guilty whenever she was around Blaise, teetering with the knowledge of the bond between them. She knew that she had to tell him, knew it with every fibre of her being. She just didn't know how.

She had thought about it, considered from every angle, but she still had no clue. Holly had even gone so far as to ask Tom what he thought, but the teenager hadn't known what to do either. Luna and Draco weren't much help; they were supportive of her, but they couldn't ease her burden.

It was Holly's alone.

Sure enough, Blaise had caught on to her odd behaviour, but he thought it to be a result of his own from the previous weeks and her nervousness about Samhain. Still, if things continued as they were, he would undoubtedly realise that it was due to something else entirely. And undoubtedly, he would ask.

And Holly couldn't lie. She would have to tell him. The sooner the better.

She considered her problem as she and Draco sat at the Slytherin table, the blond positively brimming with excitement about the upcoming Hogsmeade visit. Holly, of course, wouldn't be going, not since her form was unsigned. However, she found that she didn't mind all that much, having visited last September. And with her recent problems with her Mind Magic, the girl didn't think it such a good idea. She had never really liked crowds, and over half the school would be crammed into one village.

Even now, she was employing her heaviest shielding, for once blocking out everything. She knew it was a cowardly thing to do, but she couldn't help herself. Holly had retreated into her own mind, firmly keeping herself away from any and all of Blaise's thoughts. It was bad enough that she had formed a bond between them; he at least deserved some privacy.

This, in turn, led her mind back to her problem with her best mate.

“Are you absolutely sure you don’t want one of us to stay?” Draco questioned, interrupting her thoughts. His eyes glittered brightly as he sipped his morning tea.

“No, you go on,” she replied. “Enjoy yourself. I know that you’ve been looking forward to this.” Holly gave him a soft smile, a warm feeling in her chest as she set about filling her plate.

“So you definitely can’t go?” Blaise cut in, almost making her jump as he sat down beside her.

Holly hadn’t expected him to pop up, not with her mental senses as closed in as they were, and she visibly tensed as he accidentally brushed her arm. If he wasn’t suspicious of her before, Blaise certainly had to be now. She really needed to tell him and soon.

He looked at her strangely but didn’t comment on it. “Not even sneak out?”

“No,” Holly said, trying to calm her sudden surge of guilt, “Remus asked Luna and me to have lunch with him.”

Blaise frowned at the professor’s name, but he didn’t say anything as he watched more of their Housemates filter into the Great Hall, most of them brimming with excitement.

“Oh... I supposed that you really can’t miss that.” Draco paused for a moment. “Are you sure you don’t want me to stay?”

“Or me?” Blaise chimed in, helping himself to some eggs.

Holly tried not to fidget as he glanced at her, thankfully managing it. “No. I’ll be perfectly fine.”

“We’ll bring you back sweets then,” Draco said cheerfully. “Loads of them. Even though you probably won’t get them until tomorrow,” he added to himself. “Good luck, by the way,” he said in an undertone. “I hope everything goes well tonight.”

“Me, too,” Holly acknowledged uneasily, thinking about the ritual she was doing that very evening.

Truthfully, she wasn't the only one depending on it. A number of her friends had also lost their parents, though not both of them like her, and they desperately wanted to make certain that their loved ones were okay.

Holly studied Theo as he smiled and sat down across from her, recalling that his mother had died when he was eight from a magically resistant strain of Goblin Flu. Both he and his dad had been at her bedside, his two siblings away at school at the time, and Theo still wasn't certain they would have survived it without the support of Gavin's mum, a friend of Mrs. Nott from their schooldays.

Her eyes flickered to Luna and then Daphne. Holly knew that the blonde's own mother had been killed when one of her magical experiments had backfired. That was opposed to Daphne's Muggleborn father. He had been visiting with his parents and had gone to the grocers for them one summer day, only to be mugged and knifed in the back on the return trip.

Of course, there was also poor Blaise, who had lost not one father but two, his own and his sisters'. He was also counting on her; he needed this to work so that he could finally put his mind to rest. For all that Blaise had done for her, she could give him this much.

Holly's gaze went to the boy beside her, and she watched him out of the corner of her eye. The girl hesitantly wondered if they were cursed then, her friends and her, thinking of the odds that so many in their group would have lost a parent. Perhaps they were simply unlucky. Or maybe it was just the undercurrent of violence still prevalent in the world. Either way, did it really matter; the people they loved were just as dead.

She glanced away from Blaise, unable to look anymore. Holly quickly set her mind on another topic, engaging Draco in a lively discussion about the wonders of Hogsmeade.

The rest of breakfast passed in a pleasant blur. Soon enough, the students going to the village queued up in the Entrance Hall, Filch

checking their names on the list as they exited through the front doors. Holly and Luna saw them off, Blaise hesitating for several moments before finally leaving with Draco at his side.

After the others were gone, the two girls lingered for several moments more but left after Filch started giving them cross looks. They wandered off to the library for a while, checking out more books for both Tom and Sirius, who became rather bored during the day when Holly and the other students weren't there. Around noon, they finally headed to Remus' office, where they had an enjoyable lunch, lingering for several hours.

During that time, Professor Snape appeared, delivering a smoking goblet for the other teacher and seeming rather unsurprised to see either of the man's guests. Holly caught the word "Wolfsbane" flash through Remus' mind as he drank the potion down, grimacing at the taste. From what she could surmise of his other thoughts, this strange concoction apparently allowed him to keep his mind whenever he transformed, preventing him from harming both himself and anyone else.

Holly and Luna made excuses and left soon afterwards, ducking down a secret corridor that led to Slytherin's other hidden passageways. They headed into the main part, stopping off at the room directly across from the one Sirius had taken over. Inside, the Animagus was doing a few last minutes things needed for the summoning ritual. He had already drawn a large, white circle in the very centre of the room, adding some unrecognisable runes along the edges. At each cardinal direction, there were significantly bigger ones, which the girls could clearly make out from the door. In the four corners, he had set up simple alters, one with only candles, another with an athame, the third with a chalice, and the last with the framed picture of Holly's parents. The objects themselves would be moved before the actual ritual, set upon the very same runes Sirius and Tom were in the process of finishing.

Holly was only thankful that both of them had taken Ancient Runes when they had gone to Hogwarts since what they were doing was beyond her current level of knowledge. Besides, as nervous and bursting with excitement at the prospect of seeing her parents as she

was, the girl doubted she could draw a stick person, much less something as complicated as what they were doing.

With the trouble she'd had with Blaise the last week, Holly had almost forgotten to be anxious about this. However, her nervousness was back full force, and it was all she could do to keep from dancing from foot to foot. She was going to miss both the end of the Halloween feast and the Samhain celebration in the dorm, but it was more than worth it.

Tonight, she was actually going to speak with Lily and James Potter.

That evening, Holly was alone in the ritual room. Blaise and Tom were just outside the door, waiting in case anything happened. The others were all at the Halloween Feast, making excuses for the absence of their missing friends. Sirius was Muggle only knows where, having refused to attend the summoning with her. He had plainly told Holly that this was her time with her parents since he had had over a decade with them. When they did the ceremony again, he would be present, but this one was hers alone.

Holly glanced at her watch as she carefully set the framed photo of her parents on top of the runes at the western end of the circle, seeing that it was almost seven. Tom had concluded that this would be the best time due to the magical properties of the number. Sirius had seconded his opinion, vaguely remembering a similar ritual in his youth. The Black family had apparently wanted to contact a long dead relative in reference to an Unplottable property they had misplaced after the woman's death.

The girl shook the thought away, stepping back to look at her work. Everything was ready. All she had to do now was wait, and as the minutes stretch on, Holly silently recited the incantation in her head, praying to anyone who would listen that she would get it right. She watched the seconds tick by, and at exactly seven, Holly began the spell, silently grateful that the blasted thing was at least in English.

"Spirits of North, guardians of the gateway to earth, please heed my call. I ask to speak to two people long departed on this most magical of days."

Holly paused, and the chalice on the northern runes trembled, even as the writing underneath started to glow. The water inside the cup rippled, no longer reflecting the ceiling above it but showing starlight, and she walked around the edge of the circle to the left.

“Sentinels of East, keepers of the path to magic, please heed my call. I entreat you to guide two souls to me on this night of death and life.”

The athame in the east burned with a colourless light, its runes also glowing. The circle between the chalice and the dagger flared gold, the writing around it now silver. Holly moved to the left again, now standing directly opposite where she had started.

“Souls of South, keepers of the veil between worlds, please heed my call. I implore you to deliver two beings from death for just this day.”

The unlit candles suddenly blazed on their own. The magic gathering in the north and east spread to the south. The circle was now half-activated, still an equal mixture of burning gold and serene white. The Slytherin stepped to the left again, facing the athame from across the circle.

“Gods of West, guardians of the gateway to heaven, please heed my call. I beseech you to return my parents, Lily Rose Evans and James Meredith Potter, to me on this holy night of Samhain.”

The people in the photo stilled, completely frozen in time. The western quarter of the circle came to life, but one portion of it remained lifeless. Holly walked back to her starting position and quietly sat on the floor, her legs tucked beneath her, eyes staring at the very centre of the circle.

“Great Maker, parent of all things, keeper of light and dark, I pray that you heed my call. Please allow me to once more see those I love, the ones who gave their lives for me.”

The summoning circle flared as the magic spread from west to north, completing it in a wash of blazing gold and silver. Inside, the air positively glittered, like it was filled with thousands of tiny fairies. Two glowing spheres suddenly appeared side by side, and they expanded to human-size with a flash, revealing the smiling faces of two people.

Holly gaped, pupils so dilated that the green was just a thin ring around the black.

“Mum? Dad?” she breathed. If she hadn’t already been sitting, the Slytherin would have undoubtedly sunk to the floor.

“Holly,” they said together, beaming at her with wide grins.

The girl was positively dumbfounded. This wasn’t at all like looking into the Mirror of Erised, where everything was foggy. They were clear, real. Her parents were actually here, seemingly alive, if not for the fact that they were somewhat transparent.

Holly simply stared, almost in a trance, but she managed to recover somewhat, instead settling for watching Lily and James Potter with something akin to wonder. She gazed at them, studying her parents in a way she had never been able to before, trying to burn what they looked like into her mind as she did.

Lily was just as beautiful as her picture, vivid red hair sleek and smooth as it curled gently down her back. Her eyes were exactly the same as Holly’s, and the Slytherin could easily tell that they were related from the shape of their noses and most definitely their chins. She didn’t look a thing like Petunia or Dudley, for that matter. She was too petite with features actually proportional to her size.

Likewise, James looked as he did in the photo. His hair was dark, the colour between the deepest brown and black, and his cheery hazel eyes peered at her from behind his round glasses. Truthfully, he was scarily similar to Sirius physically, especially his build and the mischievous grin on his face, and Holly would have sworn that they were at least close cousins or possibly even brothers if she hadn’t known better. James’ face was rounder though and his coloration off. Still, there was a distinct resemblance, and the girl wondered if they were related.

In a daze, Holly stretched out her hand toward them, but it came in contact with something solid as she passed the boundary of the circle. A shield-like light flared underneath her fingertips, not forcing her back but not letting her go forward either.

Lily also reached forward, trying to touch her only child. However, as soon as her fingers crossed the summoning circle, they vanished, reappearing when she moved back inside. Both Holly and her mum stared for an instant, and the latter slowly withdrew her hand, James wrapping a comforting arm around her waist.

"Hello, dearest heart," Lily Potter said after a moment, eyes suspiciously very bright.

"You look so very beautiful," James inserted grin turning wistful. "Just like your mum when she was younger."

Holly just smiled with awe. "I can't believe you're actually here. Really here. I have so much to tell you."

"And we have so much to tell **you**," her dad responded back. "We've been watching you, Holly, and we couldn't possibly be prouder. You fought a Basilisk! Saved Ginny Weasley. Pulled Gryffindor's sword from the Sorting Hat." James beamed wider than ever and winked devilishly. "You even gave Tom a chance when others wouldn't have."

"We're so very proud of you," Lily agreed, smiling softly at her husband's antics. "We're glad that you're finally back with Sirius. Even though he's a bit irresponsible, he always has your best interest at heart; he'll take good care of you." She paused then, a shadow crossing her face. "But he also needs your help, love."

"You mean with Pettigrew?" Holly asked, tilting her head to the side.

James nodded. "You need to find him, show that rat to Dumbledore and the Ministry to prove Sirius' innocence. With him free, you definitely won't have to return to the Dursleys." He scowled at the mere mention of the family. "Sirius would never allow it. He probably won't even now."

The Slytherin frowned ever-so-slightly. "I'm not sure I understand. I have to go back, don't I? What about the blood protections? And aren't they my guardians; how could Sirius keep me from returning?"

"He can protect you far better than Petunia ever could," James stated resolutely, grin replaced by a very serious expression. "Not to mention that he still has a well-warded house of his own, and with his family, he knows some powerful Dark magic."

"The blood protection is active," Lily continued, no longer smiling either, "but it's not nearly as strong as it should be... as it will need to be in the future. It's based on emotion, and Petunia--"

"Doesn't love me," Holly concluded, crossing her arms over her chest. "Still, that doesn't explain how Sirius will prevent me from returning. Wouldn't the Ministry make me?"

"Once he's free, they won't be able to stop him," her father assured. His face was very determined. "And Dumbledore won't either; blood protection be damned."

His wife ignored his language, choosing instead to answer Holly's questioning look. "Sirius is your godfather, dear," Lily explained slowly. "He is your caretaker, and the Ministry won't be able to keep you from him." She exchanged a very strange glance with her husband, something wordless passing between them.

Holly barely registered it, far too shocked to really care.

"Godfather?" she questioned faintly.

"Yes, fawn," James carried on, "the person we wanted to take care of you if anything happened to us. Your legal guardian."

"Sirius is my guardian?" Holly repeated like a broken record. "But the Ministry? Azkaban?"

Her father sighed, rubbing his forehead. "Remember, he wasn't convicted. He was just thrown to the Dementors without a trial, so he's still your guardian legally. If he's freed, he can and will take you in."

"He never told me," Holly said weakly. "Why didn't he tell me?"

"He's afraid, sweetheart," her mother replied, leaning back into her husband's half-embrace. "Afraid of what you would think. He wanted you to get to know him first, but with things the way they are with Petunia and her husband and son..." She shrugged helplessly.

"And the Dursleys?" the girl asked, heat coming into her tone. "Why am I there then?"

James was distinctly unhappy. "For one, you weren't supposed to be with those bast--" He was cut off as Lily's elbow firmly hit him in the ribs.

"What your dad meant to say is that we never wanted you to go to Petunia," Lily said softly, face tightening at the mention of her sister. "You were supposed to be with Sirius. No matter what happened, you needed to go with him."

"Why?" Holly inquired, noticing the odd inflection in her mum's voice. "Why was it so important that I be with Sirius? Other than the fact that he's my godfather," the girl added the last with a hint of hurt, rather upset that he hadn't told her himself.

Lily nibbled on her lip before answering. "He is..." She shook her head, struggling to find better words to explain. "Sirius and you..." she trailed off, eyes going to her husband and begging for help.

"Well, you see, Holly," James began, running his hand through his already messy hair in a nervous gesture. "Sirius and you are--"

However, he faltered then. Both he and his wife stilled, eyes flickering from side to side as the circle around them flared oddly. They exchanged a very surprised look, faces very tight.

"Dammit, Sirius," James growled suddenly. "Not now, you bloody idiot." He turned to his daughter. "Holly, you have to leave now. Get to that fool before he's caught."

"I don't understand," Holly numbly stated, blinking very rapidly.

“You have to go, dearest heart,” Lily put in imploringly. “You have to get Sirius before they find him. He’s at the entrance to Gryffindor Tower.”

Holly stood up. “But--”

“Go now, fawn,” James said desperately. “Go... and remember that we love you.”

Lily agreed in a choked voice, “We will always love you.” She leaned forward, hand reaching for Holly, but her fingers once more disappeared when they crossed the boundary. The circle flared again, and James tightened his arm around his wife. The couple smiled at their daughter with tears in their eyes before suddenly vanishing in a swirl of white light.

Holly stood in a daze, staring at the now empty circle. But her mind quickly came back to her, and she raced to the door. She was out like a shot and half-way down the corridor before either Tom or Blaise could react.

“Holly, what--” the caramel-skinned boy began, but he faltered as she raced away.

Both he and his companion tore after her, the elder of the two actually gaining on her. Holly was fast, but so was Tom, still quick from years of outrunning bullies at the orphanage. Yet, as fast as he might be, Tom couldn’t go faster than the diary, or he would soon be at the limits of its range. And unfortunately for him, Blaise currently had the thing in his pocket, and he was still not near as quick as his friend.

The girl was down the passageway and exiting before either caught up. She was just a few corridors over from the entrance to Gryffindor, and Holly did her best not to run all out, knowing it would be beyond suspicious. Instead, she settled for a somewhat brisk pace, an idea striking her as she walked.

“Snuffles,” Holly called, somehow managing to keep both her stride and her voice even. “Snuffles, where are you? Blaise is worried sick,” she added, supposedly to herself, but the girl could see the portraits eyeing her curiously as she went down the hallway.

The Slytherin had just rounded the corner, the entrance to Gryffindor Tower almost within sight, when a ball of fur collided with her foot. She snatched the kitten up before he even had time to react.

“Don’t struggle,” Holly whispered in an undertone as he squirmed in her arms. “We have to get out of here.” She added with a much louder voice, “Oh, Snuffles. There you are. Let’s get you back to the dorm.”

The girl retraced her steps, moving as quickly as she dared under the watchful eyes of the portraits. She ducked down a different passageway, one that she’d seen the Gryffindors use several times to get to Potions class, and unbeknownst to them, it came out very close to her own Common Room.

“Salazar’s staff, what were you doing, Sirius?” she demanded once they were away from anyone who might overhear, unbelievably irritated. Holly had just lost the chance to spend more time with her parents, and she was in no mood to deal with fools.

He mewed in response.

The girl exhaled loudly. “Never mind, just be still.”

She went down the hallway, tucking him underneath her arm, but he squirmed again. And she practically snarled. Holly turned the cat about in her hands and lifted him to her face, their noses practically touching as his legs dangled mid-air.

“I’m not very happy with you right now. I suggest that you behave yourself, dear godfather.” Her green eyes flash the colour of the Killing curse.

Sirius started and then gulped as her words sank in.

“Oh, yes, I know about that,” she stated as she hurried down the tunnel, idly wondering how far Tom and Blaise had followed her. “And trust me, we will have words about this.”

He groaned as Holly came out a side corridor just down from the entrance to Slytherin’s dorms. She hurried to the portrait, only to find

that her Housemates were exiting in a steady stream. She stepped up with them, sliding innocuously in between Theo and Pansy without anyone else the wiser. Her two friends glanced at her curiously but remained blissfully silent as all of Slytherin House headed for the Great Hall.

Once there, they were greeted by the sight of the entire student body, and Dumbledore quickly informed them that they would be spending the night as the faculty searched the castle. He was nice enough to magic the tables out of the way and to create comfortable, purple sleeping bags for them before he departed with a white-faced McGonagall.

All of Slytherin congregated where their table normally was, the oldest members gathering all the first and second-years together. Thankfully, Holly's year-mates were left alone, and they pulled their makeshift beds to a corner, not too far from where Marcus Flint and Titania Shacklebolt were whispering heatedly as they guarded a side entrance. All around them, supposition buzzed as the Gryffindors quickly told the other Houses what had happened, and Holly's friends glanced at her with alarm, already knowing that Sirius Black was supposed to be after her. Nevertheless, Luna and Draco calmed significantly when they noticed her petting a very sheepish looking Snuffles, and Blaise's face lit with sudden comprehension, understanding her earlier behaviour.

"Everyone into their sleeping bags," Percy Weasley announced, patrolling the aisles. "Come on, now, no more talking! Lights out in ten minutes."

Around them, everyone was speculating.

"How did Black get in?" Elgin Urquhart questioned nearby

"Is he still in the castle?" Constantine Warrington asked from the far side.

"And why would he go to Gryffindor Tower?" Sophia Dolohov wondered to their right.

Holly's eyes flickered around as she caught snippets of their conversation, Theo scooting his sleeping bag closer to hers so that they could lie side by side. Draco was just in front of her, Blaise to her left, and they exchanged a look as the Bloody Baron floated over to speak with Marcus and Titania. Holly sighed and scratched under Snuffles' chin, reassuring him after he mewed pitifully. Milli concernedly watched her from an adjacent sleeping bag, and Luna hovered on the chubby girl's other side, apparently deciding that she wanted to stand instead of sit. Gavin and Autumn were close to the far wall, talking softly to the fifth-years next to them, shooting Holly worried glances when they thought she wasn't looking. Daphne and Cynthia were opposite them, not even trying to hide the fact that they were watching. Greg, Vincent, and Pansy were just behind her, and she didn't have to see them to know what they were doing.

Just beside Holly, Theo shifted, gazing at her strangely. He studied her for several minutes as the murmurs continued to float throughout the room.

Suddenly, he leaned toward her. "Why don't you look panicked?" he asked very softly, so softly that the other people in their group had to strain to hear.

However, it was Blaise who answered.

"Not here," he responded quietly. "Tomorrow... when there aren't other people around."

Theo nodded, the others copying his actions. They sat in somewhat strained silence for a moment as the whispers carried on around them, but they apparently took Holly's lack of concern to heart, now just watching her with curiosity. Thankfully, Draco broke the mood as he slid over a large box of Honeydukes' finest chocolate, not having the chance before to give to her. Holly beamed and thanked him before taking the lid off. She cast a quick Freezing charm on the contents, taking a piece and offering one to the blond. He merely waved it away, looking at her like she had grown another head.

"You are so weird, Potter," he announced, but he was smiling. His diversion had worked, and even now, the rest of their friends were perking up at the prospect of chocolate.

“Oh, don’t be talking about her like that,” Milli inserted as learned forward, taking the box Holly offered her. “Besides, it’s really good this way.” She actually managed a smile, her earlier worry now buried.

“It is,” Pansy insisted as she helped herself, distributing the chocolate to the rest of their group.

Within minutes, it was empty, having been passed on to the rest of the House.

“The lights are going out now,” Percy Weasley called out to the room. “I want everyone in their sleeping bags, and no more talking!”

The candles went out seconds later. Nonetheless, murmurs permeated the entire room, and Percy could do nothing to quiet them. Gradually, everyone fell asleep, and the soft sound of their breathing was only interrupted by the patrolling Prefects and the teachers who stopped in every half-hour.

Sometime around three in the morning, Professor Snape came to check on his Slytherins. He immediately centred on Holly, actually gliding over to where she rested on her side, watching as Snuffles cuddled closer to her stomach. A peculiar expression flitted across his face as his eyes travelled to her nearby friends.

“Severus?” Dumbledore said gently, walking to his Potions master. He gazed down at Holly, something nameless flashing through his eyes.

“Headmaster,” the younger man responded in an equally soft tone. “The whole of the third floor has been searched. He’s not there. And Filch has done the dungeons; nothing there either.”

Both professors were trying to speak as quietly as possible to not to disturb the students, but what neither one of them realised was that Holly was actually awake, having been roused from her doze when her Head of House had approached. And the girl was currently straining her ears to hear the rest of their conversation.

“What about the Astronomy tower?” Dumbledore asked in turn. “Sybill’s rooms? The Owlery?”

“All searched--”

“Very well, Severus. I didn’t really expect Black to linger,” the headmaster responded tiredly, sounding every bit his age. He looked at Holly again, smiling tenderly at how peaceful she looked.

The Potions master shifted on his feet, glancing away from Draco. “Have you any theory as to how he got in, Professor?”

Dumbledore sighed. “Many, Severus, each of them as unlikely as the next.”

“And the portrait?” Professor Snape inserted. “Did she say anything useful about the attack? Anything at all?”

Holly could feel the headmaster’s magic tingle faintly then in some bizarre display of emotion.

“The Fat Lady said Black fled when he heard someone coming down the corridor, and he slashed her to keep her from calling out a warning,” the headmaster said softly, his glasses glinting in the light from the hovering ghosts.

“I don’t see what this has to do with anything--” the Potions master began, but Dumbledore interrupted him.

“Severus, it was Holly. She was the one walking down the hallway.”

Her Head of House’s eyes widened as he realised just how close they had come to disaster. “That foolish girl,” he stated intensely, eyes flicking down at her. “By Siobhan, what was she doing there?”

“Searching for Mr. Zabini’s cat apparently,” Dumbledore mused, his voice sounding strained. “Do not be hard on her, Severus. She had no way of knowing that Black would manage to get inside the castle.”

Professor Snape snorted and mumbled, “Safest place in all of Britain my ar--”

“Professors,” a voice interrupted from behind them.

The two men turned as Percy Weasley approached. They lingered for a time before finally wandering off, but not until they had all but stared at her for several minutes more. Holly let out a little sigh of relief as they left and glanced around her, seeing that the people around her were still very much awake. Theo watched her with glittering eyes, a very strange expression on his face. Blaise and Draco gazed back at her evenly, something silent passing between them as their eyes flickered to Snuffles.

Sirius had a lot of explaining to do.

“Just what do you think were you doing last night, Sirius?” Holly asked early the next morning as she sat on the bed the Animagus had transfigured for himself.

She and the others had temporarily shaken off their friends, promising to explain later. And now, they were attempting to get their own answers. Sirius, however, was being strangely reluctant.

“Going for a night-time stroll?” Tom added in sarcastically from by the door. “Thought you’d top it off with desecrating a priceless artwork?”

Draco snorted. “As if anyone would consider a picture of a witch that fat to be priceless,” he muttered.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Sirius chuckled a little, but he instantly quieted when Blaise glared at him.

“Think that’s funny, do you?” the boy asked, irritation clear in his voice.

The others looked at him in surprise. Except for Holly, they had never heard him sound like this before, and even Tom seemed shocked. Poor Luna was particularly stunned, not used to his kind of behaviour and not very good with anger in the first place. She blinked owlishly from her spot on the floor, causing Draco to crouch down beside her and wrap a comforting arm around her shoulders.

“And what would have happened if you were caught?” Blaise continued accusingly, brown eyes flashing. “Did you even stop to

think about that? Do you even care what that would have done to us? To Holly?"

Sirius put his arms over his chest defensively, his normal jovial expression long gone. "I did. I just--"

"Then what the hell were you doing?" Blaise interrupted fiercely.

"Blaise," Holly said, putting a hand on his arm. "Please."

The boy didn't appear happy with her request, but he acquiesced, nonetheless. Holly wasn't exactly ecstatic about this either. Still, they needed answers, and her best friend wasn't helping any.

Holly rubbed her temples and turned to Sirius. "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you say that you're my godfather?" she asked unexpectedly, managing to keep her tone even, despite all the hurt in her voice.

Her friends stiffened, all but Luna shooting Sirius vicious glares. The blonde, in turn, looked at him with a very sad expression.

Sirius caught Blaise's eyes but looked away. The man exhaled very slowly then. He walked over to Holly and knelt in front of her, head hanging in shame.

Blaise twitched right next to them but mercifully remained silent.

Moments later, Sirius finally replied, voice somewhat choked, "I just wanted to ease you into the idea. I wanted you to get to know me. You needed to know that I'm nothing like the Dursleys first."

Holly was rather affronted. "I never said that you were."

"No, but unconsciously, you were thinking it. You don't trust adults, always comparing them to the Dursleys in your mind," Sirius responded, peering up at her with his silvery-blue eyes. "I can tell. That's why you never tell them anything, not really. And I partially fall into that same category. Only my situation and the fact that I was friends with your parents, makes you trust me. It's not because I actually did anything to prove that I was worthy of it."

Tom rolled his eyes. "You can say that again," he mumbled to himself.

Luckily, no one but Blaise heard him.

In the meantime, Holly simply stared at Sirius. There was a denial on her lips, but she bit it back, really thinking about what he had said. In all painful honesty, it was nothing but the truth. She did reflexively compare the adults in her life to the Dursleys; she didn't trust them to look out for her, to do things in her best interest, not really. After all, why should she? In her experience, adults weren't to be trusted. Her friends, on the other hand, were different. They had earned her faith in them, something that Sirius still needed to work on.

The girl was still considering when Blaise shifted beside her.

"If you're really Holly's godfather," the boy stated suddenly, his earlier anger now firmly buried, "that means you should know about her... know that she's--"

"A Mind Mage?" Sirius put in, his eyes locked on hers. "Yeah, I know. Kind of hard not to with the way you used to send stuff in the room flying when you were little. I wanted you to tell me though. I wanted you to trust me enough with it first, and when you did, I planned to tell you that I was your godfather." He sighed then, looking up at her with an unreadable expression. "We've lost so much time, you and me," he murmured softly.

Holly gazed at him for a long moment, searching his face for the truth. To his surprise, she didn't appear angry or even annoyed anymore.

"I understand." At his look, she continued, "No, really. I do. That was same reason I didn't tell you earlier and why I didn't tell my friends from the beginning either." She reached forward and took his hand, giving it a squeeze. "Does Remus know?" she questioned after a minute.

"No," Sirius replied, momentarily forgetting the others in the room as he squeezed her hand back. "At least, I don't think he does. He didn't get a chance to spend as much time with you back then, not like I did. I practically lived with Lily and James before they went into hiding. Remus was around, just not nearly as often since he was off doing

things for Dumbledore. I think he suspected something was up though,” the Animagus admitted, thumb rubbing over her palm, “but we explained most of it away as just regular accidental magic. We didn’t tell him like we did the rat since we thought him to be the spy. Of course, we didn’t even tell Pettigrew until right before your parents went into hiding.”

“That’s right,” Tom inserted, and they glanced at him. “When you first explained to us what had happened, you said that you went after Pettigrew because he knew what Holly was.”

Sirius inclined his head. “But he only thinks she’s a telekinetic. He never knew there was anything else to it.”

“Well, that’s good,” Luna commented pleasantly. “That means he can’t reveal she’s a telepath.”

“At least, that’s one thing we don’t have to worry about,” Blaise allowed, glancing at Sirius with a raised eyebrow.

The man looked back evenly. “You’ve got to understand,” he addressed the room, particularly his goddaughter. “There are just some things I can’t tell you yet, Holly,” Sirius said seriously, eyes flicking to her. “You’re not ready yet. I’m not ready yet.”

The students around him seemed distinctly unhappy with this statement. Tom twirled his wand in his fingers in an agitated motion. Draco crossed his arms over his chest, standing once more. Blaise frowned distinctly, while Luna continued humming.

“That’s fine,” Holly replied at last. “You’ll just have to accept the same from me then. Just know that I don’t like when people take advantage of me or my friends,” she warned, but there was no real venom to her voice. It was a simple statement of fact.

Sirius nodded.

Holly adjusted her glasses on her face and asked in a tired voice, “Can you at least tell me why you went to Gryffindor Tower?”

Sirius ran a hand through his hair in a gesture very reminiscent of James. "I had to get something." There was a peculiar expression on his face, almost vengeful, and his hands clenched into fists.

"From Gryffindor Tower?" Luna inquired, looking slightly perkier. She was actually rocking from side to side now in a parody of dancing.

"What could you possibly want from there?" Tom questioned, studying the man shrewdly. There was a distinct frown on his face as he gazed at Sirius.

But he didn't respond. Instead, he clenched his free hand so tightly that his knuckles were beginning to turn white.

"Sirius," Holly prompted, giving him a fierce squeeze with her fingers.

The man gritted his teeth. "Pettigrew," he answered tersely.

Everyone blinked.

"Come again?" Blaise wondered if he had heard correctly.

"Pettigrew," Sirius repeated. "He's here. At Hogwarts. In Gryffindor Tower."

"He's here?" Holly asked, face going white. "Really here?"

The Animagus stated heatedly. "I saw him. He's here, pretending to be a rat."

"A rat?"

Holly's mind was whirling. There was something, some idea, some recollection just within her mental grasp. But she couldn't quite reach it.

"Yeah," Sirius responded edgily, "he's some boy's pet. A lanky redhead with a big nose."

Her mind instantly came to a dead stop.

“But you were in Gryffindor Tower... and a boy’s pet...” Green eyes widened to impossible size as realisation dawned. “You can’t possibly mean... you can’t,” she murmured to herself.

Tom pushed himself away from the door, moving closer to them. “What is it, Holly?”

She didn’t answer.

“Holly?” Blaise questioned beside her, putting both hands on her shoulders and shaking gently. “Holly!”

Luna and Draco exchanged an incredibly worried look. Tom stepped even closer. Blaise shook his friend harder. Sirius merely closed his eyes.

“Pettigrew,” Holly breathed, finally coming back to herself. “Pettigrew... he’s Scabbers. They’re the same.” She groaned, putting her head in her hands. “Ron Weasley’s rat!”

AN: Just so everyone knows, while I am saying that Draco and Sirius are related, it is much more distantly than canon. I’m not using the official Black Family tree, which is available on Wikipedia, if anyone wants to go look. In my mind, Sirius and Draco are at the least fourth cousins.

Also, I realise that this is a very dialogue heavy chapter, but that can’t be help. And the summoning ritual is something I came up with on my own.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Thirty-Two: Marauders and Maps

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Thirty-Two: Marauders and Maps

The uncovering of Peter Pettigrew as Scabbers the Rat was not the only revelation that morning, though this time Holly did the revealing. Class had been cancelled for the day since the teachers were too busy fortifying the castle, and all of the Slytherin third-years and their Ravenclaw allies were now in Salazar's secret passageway, not too far from where the Animagus slept. Holly herself had just finished explaining the truth about Sirius Black, not to mention a few other things, and most of them had taken the revelation about Snuffles' real identity rather well. All of them except--

"Maker, and to think what I did to him!" Pansy said incredulously as she looked back and forth between Holly and Milli.

"I know," the heavy-set girl inserted with very wide eyes. "We basically molested him in cat form. And not once! Several times! He has to be furious with us!"

Her friend, who had put her head in her hands, instantly stiffened. "Wait! This is Sirius Black. My Mum told me that he's supposed to be..." she trailed off, making a very strange noise in the back of her throat. "Oh, this is very bad."

Milli groaned painfully in agreement. Pansy actually started to tremble, though Holly couldn't fathom why. She was about to ask when Blaise returned with Sirius, the entire room freezing for a moment as he stepped in. Everyone seemed to gape at the sight of him, which Holly couldn't really blame them for. An hour earlier, they had all thought him to be a crazed mass murderer escaped from prison and out for her blood. The person before them couldn't have been further from that.

Sirius was dressed in a simple pair of pants and shirt, his hair brushed and falling softly over his shoulders. He had filled out and was healthy looking, finally up to a decent weight from all the food they were filching for him. The man was even smiling pleasantly at them, seemingly very pleased to finally meet them in human form. All told, he was rather ordinary looking, no insane expression or crazy eyes. Certainly, her godfather was quite attractive, something that

Luna was fond of thinking rather loudly, but he looked like a normal person. Nothing at all like a man on the run from the Ministry should.

The Animagus paused in the doorway for a moment, waving to them in greeting. "Hello, all. It's good to... well, not meet you so much as see you when I'm not a cat."

There was a round of greetings as Holly introduced him to everyone, Sirius shuddering almost imperceptibly as he saw Milli and Pansy. In the mean time, the two girls had both paled significantly. Sirius didn't seem to notice as he made a beeline for the empty seat next to his goddaughter, passing by a faintly scowling Tom, and as the man went past them, Pansy and Milli immediately jumped to their feet. They stood for an instant before lowering in a weird sort of half-bow.

Holly looked at them in with bewilderment as did a number of the others. Blaise and Draco exchanged a very bizarre look. Tom tapped his chin as if realising something. Sirius' eye twitched.

"Our sincerest apologies, Lord Black," Milli said in a very subdued tone. "It was inexcusable what we did to you earlier. Our only defence is that we did not know." She was about to continued, but Sirius cut her off.

"Don't worry about it. You really didn't know... and don't do that," he added hastily as they lowered more. "Just forget about it entirely." He made a dismissive gesture when Pansy tried to speak. "No, really. Don't ever mention it again."

The two nodded meekly. "Yes, Lord Black," they said together.

"And don't call me that," the man put in sharply, looking distinctly uncomfortable as he sat down next to Holly. "As far as you're concerned, I'm simply the godfather of one of your friends, and the same goes to all the rest of you," he added, though he was looking at Holly when he said the last, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

She blinked, even as a distinct warmth spread through her chest. Belatedly, the girl noticed that the conversation had dwindled around her, and everyone sat in somewhat awkward silence for a few minutes. The Slytherins were still unsure what to make of the

newcomer, and Sirius himself didn't quite know how to react to them. He was in the veritable serpent's den, and as a Gryffindor from a time of intense House rivalry and as an escaped prisoner, he half-expected to be hexed within minutes. Of course, he didn't feel the same way with Holly or her closest friends since he had been around them longer and had gotten to know them before he had realised what House they were in. It simply wasn't quite the case with the others.

Finally, Milli broke the ice, having recovered enough to be her normal, boisterous self. She had apparently taken Sirius' words to heart, trying to stricken the entire incident from her mind.

"We really have to stop this habit of keeping everything to yourself, Holly," the chubby girl stated evenly enough, colour now returned to her cheeks.

"At least, you told us before the end of the year," Theo inserted cheerfully from Holly's other side. "That's an improvement really."

A number of the others snorted, though they did nod in agreement. However, Gavin, ever the Ravenclaw, quickly brought them back down to earth.

"Still, there are a few things I'd like for you to clear up for us," he said, addressing Sirius with a serious expression. "Such as, how you escaped and how you know that Scabbers is really Peter Pettigrew."

"Fudge," Luna answered before the Animagus could even begin to form a response. She idly coiled a strand of her hair around her wand, obviously not caring that it was slowly turning colours.

"Come again?" Daphne questioned, thinking that she hadn't heard right.

Cynthia and Autumn looked at each other in confusion. Gavin crinkled his nose in thought, Greg shifting in the seat next to him. Vincent crossed his arms over his chest, even as Theo glanced at Blaise and then Tom.

“Minister Fudge,” Luna replied, still twirling her hair. “He did his yearly visit to Azkaban, and while he was there, he gave Sirius his copy of the *Dailey Prophet*. The Weasleys were in there from where they won the Grand Prize drawing, and Ronald had his rat with him in the picture.”

Sirius inclined his head. “That’s the gist of it, at any rate. Except for the part where I’m an illegal Animagus and used that to escape from my cell in Azkaban.”

Holly’s friends goggled at him.

“Really?” Autumn asked after a second. “What sort of animal do you turn into?”

“A big, black dog. Like a Grim,” Sirius replied, and he actually paused to show them before turning back.

Theo suddenly chuckled. “Your teacup, Holly. That was why you weren’t upset. Jolly good joke on that crackpot though.” He winked and then beamed at her, and she couldn’t help but notice that he had a very nice smile.

“And it’s true then?” Daphne cut in from the other side of the room. “About Peter Pettigrew? He’s really is Scabbers?”

Sirius’ face darkened. “Yeah. It’s true.”

“Then, we have to get him,” Milli stated fiercely. “Turn him in.”

The man shook his head. “Leave the rat to me... to us,” he corrected as Holly elbowed him in the side. “If too many people are in on it, there’s a chance that someone will start to be suspicious.”

“Well, what are you going to do then?” Theo asked slowly. “How do you plan to catch Pettigrew?”

However, it was Tom, who answered.

"We'll just have to get him from Ron Weasley," the teenager responded, rubbing his chin in thought. "We have to get close to the boy first though."

Holly nodded. "We could easily wait until he has Scabbers on him and then simply summon and stun him."

"That could work," Sirius replied gravely, eyes narrowed as he considered. "It's simple but effective."

Blaise glanced at him. "Simple is usually best. We don't want anything too elaborate. It'll only create confusion."

Everyone seemed to be considering this.

"It sounds like a plan then," Pansy said with a smile, brown eyes bright.

"Perhaps," Tom inserted swiftly, interrupting before she could say anything else. "Still, there are some obvious flaws."

Cynthia tilted her head to the side. "Like what?"

"Well, someone has to first get close enough to Weasley," Draco said, scowling at the mere idea of such a thing. "Then, there's always the chance that he won't have the rat on him. We'll have to make absolutely sure that he does, and when Pettigrew is summoned, someone else will need to be a distraction so Weasley won't notice or fight us on it."

Holly sighed, looking distinctly unhappy. "It'll have to be me, I suppose. I'll have to get close to him. He's liable to be very suspicious of anyone else. Except perhaps Blaise or maybe Luna."

"Why don't you simply sneak into Gryffindor Tower then?" Daphne asked, redirecting their attention.

"They'd have added extra protects. They're probably doing it even as we speak." Tom added sarcastically, "Besides, that worked so well the first time when Black tried it." He sniffed, looking at Sirius with narrowed eyes.

The man gazed back at him evenly. "I already said I was sorry about that. And it was the perfect time to try for him. All the students were gone."

"Perfect time?" Blaise repeated incredulously. He looked like he wanted to say something else but apparently thought the better of it.

Sirius looked away.

"Still," Draco said, heading off any further arguments, "you understand what this means, Holly, don't you?" He paused, glancing around the room. "You'll have to be nice to the Golden Trio themselves, that you'll have to get close to them to get Scabbers."

"Basically," Luna commented blithely, half of her hair a very strange shade of blue, "you'll have to put up with them. Make nice with them for at least a little while. You won't be able to avoid them if you want to catch Pettigrew."

Holly scowled and said something that would have left even her father blushing.

The next few weeks were probably among the most trying in Holly's time at Hogwarts. During the entire month, she attempted various methods to get to Pettigrew, something that was easier said than done. For one, the girl definitely couldn't get into Gryffindor Tower on her own anymore, despite the Fat Lady's promise. Mostly, this was due to the fact that there was a new portrait guarding the entrance, one which featured a demented knight, who loved to challenge students to duels.

To make matters worse, Scabbers was now permanently hiding in the boy's dorms, and Ron refused to bring him out like he normally did. From what Pansy had overheard one afternoon, Hermione's monster of a cat seemed to have it in for the rat, apparently trying to eat him several times already. This meant that Holly couldn't just steal Pettigrew away from the redhead, and unfortunately, she was left with only one other avenue of entry, something she was loath to use.

Holly actually had to befriend the Gryffindors. Again.

They, of course, made even this small task exceedingly difficult. Ron and Hermione insisted on being their insufferable selves. The former had finally ended his detentions with Professor Snape, now sulking around the castle like a kicked dog, too wary of more punishment to do anything else. The latter, in turn, insisted that they use the Time Turners together, something that Holly avoided whenever possible.

Neville was the only remotely reasonable one. However, Holly had caught him watching her very strangely whenever they had class together or passed in the halls, the words “Sirius Black” prevalent in the forefront of his mind. Apparently, someone had warned him about the true threat her godfather supposedly posed, but the round-faced boy wasn’t quite certain what to make of it. Nevertheless, Neville was still the easiest of the three to get along with, and he had apologised for his behaviour the past year. That wasn’t even counting the facts that he had been the most reluctant to betray her in the first place or that he could easily allow her access to his dorm. As such, Holly slowly and carefully made overtures of friendship to him, actually hoping that they could repair their relationship enough for her to tell him the truth.

Of course, Fred and George could have simply brought her Pettigrew if they really felt like it, but Sirius especially had warned them away from that plan. The Slytherins would have to tell the Weasley twins the truth about what was going on, especially since they would be putting their lives in danger. After all, Pettigrew was still very much a Death Eater, and he could easily kill them if he felt threatened enough.

All told, the situation was a migraine waiting to happen, and the other goings-on in the school didn’t help in the slightest.

Virtually everyone, students and faculty alike, spent the two weeks after Halloween speculating about Sirius and how he had managed to get into the castle, and it seemed that each person had a different opinion. Still, most of them had obviously never read Hogwarts: A History since they seemed to think that he was Apparating or doing any number of other things that were impossible with the castle’s powerful wards. The teachers, in turn, were absolutely baffled, unable to figure out why Sirius had tried to get into Gryffindor Tower. Most,

though, seemed to believe it was because the man had thought Holly to be in that House.

Percy Weasley, acting on his mother's orders undoubtedly, now followed the third-year around like a redheaded and very pretentious guard dog, all but stalking her between classes. He was aided and abetted by the Slytherin Prefects, and Holly couldn't even sneeze without one of them knowing. Professor Snape was also watching her very closely now, even more so than he had before, and the girl often felt him just at the edges of her senses as she went around the school. Even Remus was getting in on the act, now finding all manner of excuses to get her to spend additional time with him, and the other teachers had taken to escorting Holly around the castle between classes.

All together, it was very difficult to sneak away see Sirius. And it wasn't unusual for Holly to slip off via her Invisibility Cloak, while her friends created a distraction.

Also during this time, Draco was struck by a brilliant idea, at least in his opinion. The blond decided that to control her telekinesis Holly needed to train with her ability much like she had her telepathy. More specifically, Draco thought that she should practice blocking spells. They knew she was capable of it from what she had done to Lockhart the year before, and it would undoubtedly work to her advantage if she could repeat that particular feat in times of need. Sirius and Tom wholeheartedly agreed, adding their support to the blond boy, but all of this had an unfortunate side-effect. In order to block spells, Holly first had to have them sent at her, and more often than not, they connected before she could even begin to deflect them.

Further, November also meant another full moon and yet another opportunity for the other students to realise Remus' true nature. They were helped along by an essay Professor Snape assigned when he substituted for the ill Defence teacher, which was on the ways to identify and kill werewolves. Draco reckoned that their Head of House was suspicious of his fellow professor due to his former friendship with Sirius Black. Obviously, their Head of House thought that Remus was somehow assisting the fugitive.

Her problems were further compounded by the Animagus himself. For some strange and unfathomable reason, Sirius refused to bring Remus into their little conspiracy. He claimed that he simply wasn't ready yet but would give no real explanation as to why that was, and no matter how hard the Slytherins tried to weasel it out of him, the man still wouldn't really say, his mental shields keeping even his goddaughter in the dark. In counterpoint to that, Holly offered to test the waters with Remus first, planning to tell him that she was a Mind Mage since it would then be easy to explain why she knew that Sirius was innocent. He, of course, was less than thrilled by this, but after a great deal of bargaining back and forth, Holly finally elicited a promise from him that they would most definitely tell Remus within the next few months, by Easter at the latest.

This wasn't even mentioning Holly's Quidditch troubles. Madam Hooch was now overseeing all of Slytherin's practices, ostensibly to keep her eyes on their Seeker, much to their captain's annoyance. Marcus Flint was also pressuring her buy a new broom to replace the one destroyed by the Whomping Willow, but the girl just couldn't bring herself to do it yet, especially after Blaise and Draco dropped hints that it would be better if she waited. Additionally, Titania had taken to cornering Holly during practices, very insistent that they spend time together afterwards, supposedly because they were the only girls on the team. Even further, Gryffindor crushed Ravenclaw in their match at the end of the month, actually pulling ahead of Slytherin in the standings.

Things did start to look up for Holly towards the middle of December. Before then, she had been so distracted by everything going on around her that she had all but forgotten about her bond with Blaise, meaning that she had thankfully also neglected to be anxious around him. Besides, now that her initial shock had cleared, Holly was beginning to consider the problem much more logically than she had earlier, and she realised that she simply needed to tell him as quickly as possible and deal with the fallout when it came. The only problem now was getting away from the others long enough to actually explain.

Around this time, she also successfully made overtures of friendship to Neville, actually partnering some with him in Care of Magical Creatures, but it was slow going because he still felt exceptionally

guilty. Remus was another bright point, more specifically his promise to give her anti-Dementor lessons after Christmas. He was too busy with lessons to do it before then, but Holly wasn't really that bothered. The prospect of being able to repel the foul creatures was enough for her.

Her situation further began to improve shortly before Christmas break when the Weasley twins took her aside one morning. In their usual stilted, double speaking fashion, the pair tried to cheer her up, actually succeeding when they handed her an odd piece of parchment. And a whirlwind of a conversation later, Holly had in her personal possession the infamous Marauder's Map, the very same creation that Sirius had told her about weeks ago. It was only through some bizarre miracle that the Weasley twins hadn't spotted Snuffles on there, but then, Slytherin's secret corridors weren't featured. The only time they could have possibly noticed was during the Welcoming Feast or Halloween. Sirius himself was amazed when she showed it to him, saying that it had been lost to Filch in his final month of school and he had thought the map long destroyed by now.

In the days following her momentous windfall, there was a distinct temptation to sneak off to Hogsmeade, but Holly held off. She had far more important things in mind anyway, like the fact that she could spy on people with the map. Now, it was a very simple thing to avoid her minders and to know where Pettigrew was at all times. Unfortunately, the rat was still keeping to Gryffindor Tower, one of the few places in the castle beyond her reach.

All told, break came with great relief and a great deal of cheer all around. Despite an invitation to visit the Zabini's, Holly stayed at Hogwarts. First of all, it would be cruel to force Sirius to remain behind by himself or to make him assume cat form the entire time if he came with her. Second, Remus would be at the castle, and Holly couldn't imagine leaving him alone during the holiday. Third, and most importantly in the minds of the faculty, nobody outside of her circle of friends seemed to think it a good idea for her to leave the relative security of the school. Even though Sirius could obviously enter the castle, the adults believed Hogwarts to still be the safest place for her. Professor Snape had even taken her aside at the beginning of the month, advising her to remain behind and not to

leave with Blaise or anyone else. He worried that the ride to and from the train would prove too good of an opportunity for Black to resist.

Of course, Holly had all but ordered Blaise and Draco to return home, the former so that he could also be at his mother's baby shower and the latter because he had missed his family's Yule celebration the year before. Still, she was rather happy with her decision, especially since both Theo and Luna had remained as well. Between the three of them, they had the run of both the Slytherin and Ravenclaw dorms, the only people from either House to stay. Truthfully, there were only three other students in the entire castle, two first-years and Hermione Granger herself.

And it was rather obvious why the Gryffindor was there. She was trying to work ahead to lessen the strain when classes resumed. In all honesty, Hermione was having an awful time with her Time Turner, obviously not using it to get extra sleep or to do her homework.

The day after break started, Holly was contemplating the Gryffindor's situation on her way to afternoon tea with Remus. She had just been in the library, seeing the bushy-haired girl fast asleep on a table, her head pillowed on a book. It was painfully clear that Hermione was on her way to a breakdown, more a matter of when than if. Still, Holly didn't feel the least bit sorry for her, mostly because she had brought it on herself.

The Slytherin shook her head at that thought and idly strolled down the corridor to Remus' rooms, the portraits keeping a very close watch on her as she passed. While it was highly unusual for students to visit their professors in such a private setting, it wasn't against the rules, and she had a sneaking suspicion that it made the faculty feel better to know that she was being supervised during the holiday. Truthfully, Holly was a bit nervous, especially since this was only the second time she had ever been down this particular hallway. The first had been shortly after Halloween when Remus had personally shown her his quarters, giving her the password and firm instructions to come to him whenever she needed, day or night. Holly knew that he had done it because of Sirius, and with the way things currently were, she couldn't blame him for his paranoia.

This was the first time she would be taking him up on his offer, and not quite for the reason Remus thought. Of course, he had no way of knowing that Holly was a Mind Mage or that she planned on telling him about it that very afternoon.

The third-year stopped in front of a picture of a coyote in the desert, watching the animal's tail wag back and forth excitedly when it saw her. It was somewhat rude to enter his quarters on her own, but she figured that he would much rather her wait inside than loiter out in the corridor. As such, the girl quietly murmured the password, entering into his sitting room, eyes flickering around and taking in the blue and tan furniture. Everything seemed to be exactly the same as the other time she had been here with one notable exception.

Remus Lupin was nowhere in sight.

He wasn't anywhere in the sitting room or in the kitchen area to the side, but he obviously had to be here somewhere. Down the short hallway, Holly could see that the doors to both his bedroom and to his private office were closed. Most likely, he was in one of the two rooms, and a quick check with her telepathy confirmed that he was indeed in his office. However, the Slytherin paused as she belatedly noticed a second mental presence, a very familiar one.

It was Professor Dumbledore.

She hedged on what to do, not knowing if she should just sit down and wait or if she should leave and come back later. But before Holly could come to a decision, a voice wafted through the cracks in the door, and she unconsciously moved closer to hear better.

"--But what am I going to do, headmaster?" Remus questioned, a strange quality to his tone. "She has to suspect, at the very least. I mean, Holly's clever that way. She can't have missed all the hints. And with Severus' essay..."

Dumbledore sighed. "I suggest that you tell her the truth of the matter. Now... before it is too late."

There was the noise of someone moving in a chair.

"It's just... hard. It's hard," Remus admitted softly.

"I know, my boy, but it's much better if you tell her before she figures it out," the old professor inserted. "Better to get it out in the open. And you never know, she might just accept it after all. Her father and his friends certainly did."

It was Remus' turn to sigh, and he did so rather loudly.

"Her father... yes, he did," the younger man said, the odd tone still present. "She looks so much like them. Her parents, I mean," Remus elaborated. "I first noticed it in Diagon Alley – remember how I told you that I bumped into her," he commented somewhat sheepishly, obviously recalling that particular conversation. "But it's really starting to be obvious now as she grows. She looks more like him everyday. You know, it almost hurts to look at her sometimes," he confessed.

Someone moved, and Holly realised that Dumbledore had undoubtedly just left his seat to stand by his former student.

"I know, but it can't be helped," the old man said in sombre voice. "We must simply remember and move on. It does not do to dwell on dreams, on what was or might have been."

The two were silent for a moment, and all Holly could hear was the sound of their breathing. She wondered what they were doing, if they were simply lost in thought, but she had no way of knowing.

Finally, Dumbledore spoke again.

"Holly will be here soon," the headmaster commented lightly, seriousness apparently having ended. "I had best be going, my dear boy."

There was another noise, one that Holly couldn't quite identify. She quickly backed away and hurried out the exit, silently grateful that picture wasn't of an actual person and therefore couldn't tell Remus that she had been inside earlier. She was further gladdened that none of the other portraits were within line of sight of the entrance to his quarters. The Slytherin stood there for a moment debating what to do and simply deciding to pretend that she had just arrived.

Not a second later, the portrait opened, just as Holly was about to mutter the password. Dumbledore exited and beamed at her, not saying anything as he directed her inside, only pausing long enough to squeeze her shoulder with one hand before he disappeared down the corridor. Remus ushered her into the sitting room and a chair before she could even turn to look after him.

Holly merely blinked and watched as he set about making tea, the conversation she had overhead whirling in her mind. As she studied Remus, she belatedly noticed that his shoulders were oddly hunched and that he seemed to be avoiding her gaze. Further, his face was unusually pale, eyes faintly red-rimmed with dark circles beneath.

She swiftly concluded that now was definitely not the best time to tell him she was a Mind Mage. Any discussion more serious and involved than a talk about flobberworms, and Remus might just be done in. It was best to put it off, and besides, he seemed to have other things on his mind.

That decided, the Slytherin accepted her tea gratefully and set about cheering up her friend.

The conversation was all Holly could think about for the next few days. Her mind constantly wandered back to it, regardless of what she was doing, and her distraction was making Theo and Luna incredibly nervous. Not knowing what else to do, the blonde finally suggested a trip to see Hagrid, who was probably feeling a bit neglected since they hadn't had visited him outside of class all year. Holly reluctantly agreed, deciding that it was better than being left to her thoughts. And the day before Christmas found she, Luna, and Theo standing outside of Hagrid's hut, waiting to be let in.

Inside, they heard a rather odd noise, a mixture between a deep cough and a snuffle, and several moments later, Hagrid finally came to the door. Of course, he promptly threw himself on Holly's shoulder, sobbing all over her, and it was all Theo and Luna could do to keep the man's enormous weight from sending her crashing to the ground. Somehow, between the three of them, they managed to get Hagrid

back inside and seated at the table, Theo going to make a very strong cup of tea for him.

As Holly looked around for Fang, she noticed that Buckbeak was lying in the far corner, chomping on what appeared to be chicken bones, blood spread out on the floor around him. He peered at her with a fierce, orange eye, nodding his regal head once.

Fang, meanwhile, was cowering under the bed.

“What’s wrong, Hagrid?” Luna asked as she sat in an enormous chair, her legs dangling in midair. “Have the mumbas been bothering you again?”

Hagrid opened his mouth, but only more sobs came out. So instead, he tearfully handed them a letter, the two girls bending forward to read as Theo trotted back over momentarily.

Dear Mr. Hagrid,

It has come to our attention that on the 2nd of September there was an attack by a hippogriff on a student in your class, resulting in grievous bodily harm. We have already accepted the assurances of Professor Dumbledore that you bear no responsibility for the regrettable incident.

However, we must register our concern about the hippogriff in question. We have decided to uphold the official complaint made, and this matter will therefore be taken to the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. The hearing will take place on April 20th, and we ask you to present yourself and your hippogriff at the Committee’s offices in London on that date. In the meantime, the hippogriff should be kept tethered and isolated.

Yours in fellowship...

There was a list of the school governors, including Lucius Malfoy and Neville’s grandmother.

Holly wasn’t certain what to say to this, and neither, it seemed, did the others. Theo merely shrugged as he went to fetch a steaming

mug of tea and put it in front of his host. Luna blinked repeatedly, suspiciously humming what sounded like a funeral dirge. The green-eyed girl shook her head, trying her best come up with something. But in all honesty, what could she say to this?

Buckbeak had attacked Draco, after all, even if it really was Ron Weasley's fault. Still, the hippogriff didn't deserve to be punished for something that was more accident than anything else.

"Er... I'm certain that Buckbeak will be fine," Holly finally stated, somehow managing to keep her voice even. "I mean, there is a hearing. All you have to do is clearly present your case. Explain to them what happened."

Theo frowned but thankfully remained silent, trying his best not to look at the hippogriff as he took the seat farthest from the thing. Apparently in all the fuss, Hagrid had forgotten that Buckbeak had almost skewered Theo as well.

"Yeh don' know them gargoyles at the Committee fer the Disposal o' Dangerous Creatures!" Hagrid declared, reaching for a handkerchief in his pocket and blowing his nose very loudly. "They've got in in fer interestin' creatures. And poor Beaky, I couldn' leave him tied up out there in the snow. All on his own! At Christmas. It would've broke his little heart." The man looked to be on the brink of tears again.

Holly struggled to head him off. "Well, just state the truth to the Committee, and they wouldn't be able to do anything. Buckbeak will definitely be found innocent. Isn't that right?" she directed at her friends, silently asking for help.

Theo murmured something unintelligible, while Luna smiled in agreement. Mercifully, Hagrid nodded, beginning to calm down. Buckbeak simply continued to gnaw on his chicken bones, eyeing his master with something bordering on disdain. Fang was still cowering out of sight.

"How did all this come out anyway?" the blonde asked after a moment, blissfully swinging her legs back and forth.

Hagrid's tears evaporated instantly. "Bloody Lucius Malfoy complained ter the Board!" he bit out angrily, smacking one large hand on the table.

Everyone jumped, even Buckbeak. The hippogriff gazed at them haughtily for several minutes before turning back to his meal.

Fang whimpered beneath the bed.

"Are you certain it was Mr. Malfoy who complained?" Holly asked slowly, and when Hagrid whirled to look at her, she clarified, "I mean, a student was injured; shouldn't there be some sort of investigation into it since a magical creature was involved?"

"I guess that kinda makes sense," the man allowed. "But Beaky still don' deserve none of this. He's a good hippogriff. Always cleans his talons an' all."

"Oh, yes," Theo responded sarcastically, unable to keep his mouth shut any longer. "Buckbeak is a wonderful hippogriff. Wouldn't hurt a fly."

Thankfully, Hagrid didn't pick up on his tone. The man actually beamed.

"Good then," he put in with a toothy grin, his entire bearded face lighting up. "All we've got ter do now's let them Disposal devils see that."

"We?" Holly repeated weakly. She exchanged a startled look with her two friends.

"O' course," Hagrid put in absentmindedly. "All o' you an' yer friends'll help me with Beaky's defence. All 'cept that nasty Malfoy boy. I see that he's not here. Proba'ly too scared ter show his face."

"Er... he went home for Christmas, Hagrid," Theo replied slowly. "So that would make it kind of hard for him to be here, too."

But Hagrid didn't seem to hear him. He was too busy thinking of all the things he could say in support of Buckbeak, certain that the

Slytherins would help him. And as he waxed on about his hippogriff's numerous wonderful and winning traits, Holly wondered why things like this always seemed to happen to her.

A single glance at her friends told her that they were thinking much the same.

AN: Great Maker, an update less than a month after the last one! Surely, the apocalypse is upon us! Actually, this is a little later than I intended, but I was on vacation and wasn't really in a writing mood for Harry Potter. Bleach, on the other hand, is an entirely different matter.

Also, I'm not entirely happy with the way this turned out, so I might rework it some in the future. The basics will stay the same, however.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Thirty-Three: Wolf in the Fold

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Thirty-Three: Wolf in the Fold

"You bought me a Firebolt!" Holly all but gaped at her godfather from her spot on the floor.

The aforementioned broom was quietly floating next to her, glimmering in the early morning light. She absentmindedly noted that every twig was streamlined and that the handle vibrated, as if breathlessly awaiting the opportunity to fly. And somehow, she resisted the urge to take her new Firebolt out to the Quidditch Pitch that very instant, merely settling for watching as it hovered over the scraps of wrapping paper and empty boxes.

Sirius gave a toothy grin. "Consider it twelve years worth of birthday and holiday presents," he said, sounding rather pleased with himself.

Nearby, Theo tried not to chortle as he paused in opening his gift from his sister. Luna sighed dreamily, humming as she added another paper bow to her hair, bringing her total up to six. Tom snorted as he flipped through one of his new books, A Hundred and One Ridiculously Advanced (But Useful) Runes.

Holly didn't seem to notice any of it.

"Sirius, you could have bought me a new house for as much as this cost. That's an insane amount of money for a broomstick," the girl stated as she shook her head, but Sirius couldn't help but notice her give the broom an appraising glance, a soft smile playing across her lips as she trailed a finger over the handle.

"Oh, you don't need a house. The Potters already have at least two that I know of. And come on, you know that you love it. And with all that interest on my trust vault, I didn't even put a dent in it." The Animagus shrugged, idly toying with an unopened present. "Besides, with the way things have been going," he added in an undertone, more to himself than to her, "I'm not entirely certain I'll be around to spend it all."

His goddaughter froze, her friends hesitating in the background. "Sirius..." she breathed, green eyes very wide. "Don't... don't say things like that."

The Animagus leaned over and gently took her hand, forcing her to look at him. "Sorry, but it's nothing but the truth, little one. And I think you and I both know that."

Holly gazed into his eyes for a moment before nodding. "Thank you," she said, changing the subject. "I love my gift." She moved to hug him, lingering for several minutes.

Behind her, the others exhaled collectively and returned to their own presents. Holly herself went back to her pile of gifts a little while later, and by the end, she had another Weasley sweater, this one a very light green, not to mention a variety of other clothes from Eren Zabini. Blaise and Draco had added to her already substantial book collection with several volumes on Arithmancy and elementary spellcrafting, and Remus had given her a coloured pencil stretch of Hedwig, making Holly wonder how he had managed to get such a good look at her owl. Tom and Luna had chipped in together to get her all sorts of magical games, including a few normally only played by non-humans. Of course, she had an assortment of various other things from the rest of her year-mates, Hagrid, and Neville, surprisingly enough. However, it was obvious that she liked Sirius' gift the best of all, gaze continuously flicking back to the broom.

The mood was light and cheery several hours later as Holly, Theo, and Luna walked to the Great Hall for lunch, the two Slytherins in deep and excited conversation about her new Firebolt. Luna was walking slightly behind them, singing to herself and occasionally clicking together the heels of her ruby red slippers, her present from Holly. Sirius, in turn, was currently eating his dinner, courtesy of a special package from Draco and the Malfoy family house-elves, with Tom keeping him company until the others returned.

"Draco and Blaise had to have known the entire time," Holly said wickedly as they climbed the stairs from the dungeons. "They did tell me not to buy another broom. I bet he conspired with them to set it all up."

"Probably," Theo added. "They have to be the ones who sent in the order. I can hardly see him waltzing into the Quidditch store on his own and buying it." He grinned, mentally picturing the reaction Sirius

Black would have gotten. "Still, it's well worth the trouble. Flint will have a heart attack when he sees it."

Holly snorted as they walked through the Entrance Hall. "And just think how the rest of the team will react." She casually noticed someone descending the staircase to their left but didn't bother turning to look.

"We're going to crust both Ravenclaw and Gryffindor," the boy replied victoriously. "Wood and Davies will die of envy. A Firebolt... heh heh." He practically shook with mirth as they entered the Great Hall, sauntering over to the single table in the centre of the room.

"Firebolt?" a voice questioned, and the three turned to see Hermione approaching them.

"Yes," Holly replied, noting that there were only twelve places set. "It's a broom I got as gift."

"Oh," Hermione said mildly, her eyes narrowing. "Who from?"

Luna responded instead, "Why do you want to know? Do you also wish to buy one? I hear that they're good for appeasing the Sylphs." She took the seat at the end of the table, next to Professor Flitwick, who was in the middle of speaking to Sprout. The blonde gave a happy smile as Holly nipped into the empty chair on her left.

Hermione frowned as she followed them over, pausing as she considered where to sit. "You do know who it's from, don't you? Did it come with a tag?"

"Why does that matter?" Theo countered, easing himself in the seat next to Holly. He gave a nod of greeting to the young Hufflepuff girl diagonal from him.

The Gryffindor didn't answer, simply giving them a disapproving sniff as several more people joined them. Dumbledore flitted into the space at the head of the table, a nervous first-year at his right. McGonagall was next to the poor boy, Professor Snape by Theo on her other side. Hermione was forced to fit in between the Hufflepuff

girl and Filch, receiving an evil look as she primly lowered herself into her chair.

Holly tried not to smirk at the other girl's placement. She had to fight laughing outright when the headmaster turned to share a Christmas cracker with Professor Snape, donning the tall witch's hat with a stuffed vulture that appeared afterwards. Around ten minutes later, Trelawney glided into the Great Hall, but she refused to take the seat Dumbledore offered her until McGonagall made a sarcastic retort. She flushed and quickly sat down, mumbling about the number thirteen but managing to sound almost normal for the rest of dinner. Flitwick spent the entire meal entertaining the students on his end of the table as Sprout provided humorous commentary. Snape occasionally added in his own remarks, all of which his Slytherins found hilarious, doing his best to ignore Trelawney next to him.

Remus was obvious with his absence, but with the full moon the night before, it was no wonder he wasn't there. Holly made a mental note to visit him the next day. No one should be alone on Yule, but he wouldn't want her with him in such a state since she wasn't supposed to know he was a werewolf. Besides, it would be the perfect time to address his furry little problem and the fact she was a Mind Mage. He'd be a captive audience with no chance of interruption or escape.

That decided, she tucked into her meal. And two hours later, almost bursting, Holly and Theo finally finished. Trelawney shrieked at them as they stood, demanding to know who had risen first. Thankfully, McGonagall interrupted before either could answer.

"I doubt it will make much difference unless a mad axe-man is waiting outside the doors to slaughter the first into the Entrance Hall." The Transfiguration teacher smirked in a clear challenge.

Trelawney and Hermione both gawked at the woman, as did the two first-years. Snape snorted into his potato. Flitwick covered his laugh with a cough as Sprout swallowed hers down with her drink. Dumbledore's twinkle momentarily brightened. Luna simply stood, joining her friends.

The three made their farewells, and as they left, Holly noticed Hermione leaning forward to hurriedly speak with McGonagall. The

professor's lips were a line, which was becoming thinner by the second. Dumbledore and Snape, who were listening in, exchanged a rather alarmed look, actually interrupting Hermione mid-sentence.

Holly considered this as they stepped out the doors to the Entrance Hall, which was devoid of attackers, axe-men or otherwise. But she shook it off as they safely ambled their way back to Slytherin's dorms. Tom joined them in the Common Room since no one else was present, not even the inhabitants of the portraits. They were just sitting down in front of the fire, admiring the new broom once again, when Holly felt several people rapidly approaching. She hurriedly waved Tom back into his diary and not a moment too soon as the entrance swung open an instant later. Thankfully, Sirius was in kitten form, dozing on the sofa, but he started as McGonagall and Snape entered the room and marched over.

"So that's it, is it?" McGonagall questioned without preamble, jerking her head toward the Firebolt. "Miss Granger has just informed me that you have been sent a broomstick, Potter."

Holly, Theo, and Luna blinked at her before looking at each other. Sirius shifted in an almost nervous gesture, and he had to visibly stop himself from freezing when McGonagall took a step closer to them. Professor Snape just sighed from his spot behind his colleague and fought the urge to roll his eyes.

"We understand that it did not come with a tag or identification of any sort," the Potions master submitted.

"No, it didn't come with a tag," Holly responded, thinking very quickly. She battled to keep her eyes from straying to Sirius, who was practically vibrating with tension.

"But we know who it's from," Theo put in, buying her more time.

Their Head of House arched an eyebrow. McGonagall crossed her arms over her chest in clear disbelief. Sirius snapped back to himself in that moment, thankfully adopting a more catlike attitude as Snape's eyes flickered to him.

"I see." The Potions master paused and made a gesture when no answer was forthcoming. "And?"

Holly hesitated for a fraction of a second as an epiphany struck him. "Me."

"Pardon?" the Transfiguration teacher asked.

"Me." Holly clarified, mentally nudging her friends to play along. "It's my gift to myself."

"Your gift to yourself," McGonagall repeated, as though she had heard incorrectly.

Holly nodded. "Oh, yes." She sent a telepathic prod to her companions, and Theo and Luna were quick to add their agreement.

The deputy headmistress humphed. "I find that incredibly hard to believe, Potter. And I don't appreciate being lied to." She began to tap her foot impatiently.

Snape stiffened beside her, lip curling in a very menacing fashion. "Are you accusing my students of being dishonest?" he questioned dangerously.

"I'm not accusing them of anything," McGonagall countered. "I think that the evidence speaks for itself. Obviously, Potter received this broom anonymously and doesn't want it confiscated. She doesn't seem to understand the danger involved."

"I did buy it for myself. I can go look for the receipt, if you want," the girl bluffed.

Fortunately, the professors didn't rise to the bait.

Her Head of House arched an eyebrow. "And why would you do that, Miss Potter? Why would you buy yourself such an expressive gift? And right around the holidays?" he inquired in a silky tone, dark eyes glittering.

Holly replied, "I felt that I had earned it, especially with the way things are this year. It's been **seriously** unnerving."

Everyone paused, even Snape. The aforementioned man's eyebrows rose until they were even with his hairline. Theo's head whipped around so fast that he put a crick in his neck, and Luna shook her head painfully and took a steadying breath. McGonagall gaped at Holly for a moment before promptly snapping her mouth shut.

"V-Very well, Potter." The woman cleared her throat nosily before beating a hasty retreat. "Carry on then, children. Severus." She inclined her head and promptly left.

The Potions master lingered, intently studying the three students and almost daring them to fidget. He gave Holly a nod of approval as she gave him her broom, and he mutely inspected the Firebolt for several moments before handing it back. The man turned to leave but paused just by the exit.

"Do try to win, Miss Potter," Snape commented softly, voice still managing to carry. "It would be a shame to lose after spending so much money, and certainly, the Gryffindor Quidditch team is looking forward to facing such a fine broom." His lips threatening to pull into a smile, he departed.

Holly waited a few heartbeats, sensing him truly leave. She heaved a sigh of relief and collapsed against the back of her chair, momentarily closing her eyes.

"Nice save," Theo stated. "I can hardly believe they bought it."

Luna wandered over to Sirius and picked him up. "I'm not certain that Professor Snape did."

Theo shrugged. "He probably thought that you were covering for someone. Perhaps the Zabinis."

"Or the Malfoys," Tom inserted as he came out of his diary. "As a school governor, it would reflect badly on him if he were to give such an expensive gift to a student he doesn't really know all that well."

Holly didn't even open her eyes. "Especially since the rest of the Quidditch team received Nimbus 2001s last year. Someone--"

--Like McGonagall," Theo put in helpfully.

"Like McGonagall," Holly allowed with a grin, reaching over to scratch under Sirius' chin, "could claim favouritism. She'd say that I could just ride a Nimbus like the rest of the team. No need to get a different broom."

Tom made dismissive sound. "Gryffindors," he loftily commented, dispelling the tension in the room. And when Sirius sent him a look, he gave an innocent and strangely believable smile.

Holly just laughed.

Remus, surprisingly, took the news rather well. And by well, Holly meant that he gawked with his golden eyes bugged out, mouth opening and closing much like a fish. But at least, he didn't start throwing things, as Vernon surely would have done. Or shriek, like Petunia. Though truth be told, he was emulating Dudley Dursley rather well, resembling her pig of cousin whenever a teacher asked a question.

"C-c-could you repeat that?" Remus stuttered, still entirely gobsmacked. He cautiously set down his teacup, lest it fall from his suddenly numb fingers.

Holly blinked slowly. "I know that you're a werewolf," she stated, emphasising each word.

He didn't even try to deny it. "I'm sorry," Remus apologised, voice very soft. "I know that it must come as a shock to you. I'm just so sor-
_"

"I don't care," Holly put in, belatedly realising how bad that statement had sounded.

The man stilled completely, not even breathing. He just looked at her, eyes gleaming with moisture. His hands began to shake, and he made a choked sound deep in his throat.

"I mean," she hastily clarified, "I don't care that you're a werewolf. It doesn't bother me."

His breath came out in a violent whoosh. And Remus gazed at her incredulously for a moment before abruptly bursting out into laughter.

When he failed to stop several minutes later, Holly started to seriously question his sanity, not to mention her own since she had begun this whole mess. Her face must have reflected this fact as Remus calmed and smiled at her.

"I'm sorry," he repeated once again, grin reaching his eyes. "It's just that you... you sounded like James. That's exactly what he said when they first confronted me about it, you see. Even the part where I misunderstood what they meant." The man was beaming now, seeming infinitely relieved, as though a great burden had been lifted from his soul.

"Oh," the girl replied, not entirely certain what else to say. She had no idea how to broach her next topic of conversation either.

A minute passed in silence and then two. Remus seemed content to just sit there, heart trying to reach its normal pace once more. Underneath the table, Holly's hands itched to twist in her dress, and to stop herself, she instead reached for the teapot.

"How did you figure it out?" he asked finally, just as she was about to pour more into his cup. "Did you check the lunar chart and see that I was always ill at the full moon? Or did you realise that the boggart changed into the moon when it saw me?"

"Well, I noticed that, too," the girl replied, distractedly setting down the teapot, "but that's not how I know."

Remus shifted then. "No one... no one told you, did they?"

“Like who?” Holly returned deftly, skirting around the question. “The other teachers? Professor Dumbledore?” She shook her head. “None of them told me.”

He studied her, almost like he was examining a puzzle in his mind. “Then how?” he asked again, watching her very closely.

She hesitated. This was her moment, her perfect opportunity. She was at the edge, and all she had to do was take the plunge. But Holly still hesitated, paused as she considered.

Did she really know this man? Did she trust him?

Her friends knew, but she had known most of them for almost two years before she told them. Blaise was different, but the bond between them was what had really made her tell him. Luna was a Mind Mage herself, and Tom was an alternate version of Lord Voldemort. Neither one of them was willing to throw stones from their glass houses.

Sirius had known since she was an infant, told and trusted by her parents. Yet, they hadn’t told Remus. Lily and James had thought him the spy, but they’d been wrong. They had believed in the wrong person, and that had led to their doom. And would the same thing happen to her now; would she trust the wrong person?

But Remus wasn’t like that. He’d been nothing but good to her, had reached out to her since she had first met him in Diagon. He had been trying to tell her his own secret, just hadn’t thought of how yet. He deserved the truth.

Holly sighed, less than a handful of seconds passing as her mind raced through the implications. She looked at him directly.

“Easy,” she put in. “I’m a Mind Mage. A telepath, to be more exact... among other things.”

Remus didn’t respond for a few seconds, as though his brain was straining to process the information. “Did you just say that you were a telepath?” he questioned incredulously, one finger tapping on the tabletop.

She inclined her head. "Among other things."

"I--" He exhaled. "I suppose that's one way of knowing I'm a werewolf."

Holly shrugged sheepishly. "I don't mean to snoop most of the time. It just sort of happens."

"Sort of happens," he repeated with bemusement. "I suppose that it probably does." He made a bizarre sound, which might have been a chuckle. "A Mind Mage. That's great. Exceptional. And this explains so much. So very much. I mean, he's one, t--" Remus began absentmindedly, but he instantly fell silent as he realised just what he'd been about to let slip.

"What was that?" Holly asked when he didn't say anything more.

The girl actually tried to ghost his thoughts, but she found his mind annoyingly shielded as Remus erected several mental barriers. Apparently, he had some training but hadn't bothered with them around her before since he hadn't thought he needed it.

"Nothing," he responded, trying and failing to sound truthful. "I was merely thinking aloud." The man rubbed his chin ruefully as he began to consider the implications. "Explains so much. All those little hints. And James and Lily would always seem nervous whenever I'd ask about them. Of course," he added, speaking to himself more than to her, "they did think I was the traitor."

Holly simply listened, not wanting to interrupt his monologue as it drifted.

"It's strange though that you hated Peter for some reason. You'd always throw things at him. But you absolutely loved Sirius," Remus went on with a faint hitch in his voice. The man was so occupied with her revelation that he didn't even think to sensor himself. "He was your favourite. He was the one you'd reach for, and his name was your first word. James was dreadfully disappointed." He picked up his cup but sipped air, having run out of tea some time ago without noticing.

Remus mutely shook his head and paused as he belatedly realised that he didn't taste anything. He very quizzically examined his nonexistent drink and blinked. Holly couldn't help the snort that escaped her as she watched his expression morph into something bordering on embarrassment.

"Got a bit carried away there." He gave her a guilty smile.

She returned it fully. "Don't worry about it. It's to be expected really," Holly allowed. "I did essentially waltz in here, only to drop all of this in your lap. I'd worry if you weren't a bit confused."

Remus chuckled. "Very true. We can't all be like Professor Dumbledore," he teased, sounding much more like himself and not the uncertain and wistful man from earlier. "The epitome of calm and omnipotent."

The girl's smile widened. She moved to pour them both another cupful.

"So do you have anything else to confess? Any other grand revelations?" Remus inquired in the same teasing tone.

Holly attempted not to laugh, but she couldn't quite conquer the smirk that slowly spread across her lips. She took a drink of her tea, gently setting the cup down as she squarely faced her companion.

"Tell me, Remus," she said, peering at him over the top of her glasses. "What do you think about Parselmouths?"

The rest of break passed in a very pleasant blur, and Holly greeted her returning friends with enthusiasm when they returned the day before classes were to start. They all admired her new Firebolt with the reverence it deserved, Blaise and Draco exchanging a knowing glance. Marcus Flint approached her the next day, only to depart some time later, stunned speechless. The rest of the Quidditch team had much the same reaction, though Titania did watch her oddly when she thought the younger girl wasn't looking.

Blaise took her aside that night, inquiring about her holiday. He was a bit more hesitant with his own, however. But he did repeatedly assure Holly that his family had missed her terribly, also stating that his mother insisted Holly be there when the baby was born. Quiet fell between them then, but the girl had the distinct impression that Blaise wanted to say something else, something very important. He was taking his merry time about it though, and Milli interrupted before he could even speak, coming to tell them about a three-way duel that had broken out between two Gryffindors and a Hufflepuff, who apparently all had the same girlfriend. Afterwards, Holly turned to him, but he merely deflected her searching glance.

Their almost-conversation lingered in her head, especially after she saw Blaise clandestinely speaking with several Prefects over the next few days. Every time, he seemed to be arguing or possibly reassuring them about something, but he never mentioned any of it to Holly. And subtle questioning of their other friends only got her some very peculiar looks and deft deflection.

Nevertheless, the incidents were partially forgotten as school picked up pace once more. The third-years were lucky in that they didn't have nearly as much homework as the older students, but they still had more than usual with the new classes they were taking. Holly herself was actually forced to use the Time Turner to finish it all, sneakily allowing Blaise and Draco to travel back with her.

All told, Ancient Runes and Arithmancy were progressing nicely. Rosetta had them writing full if simple runic sentences in Egyptian hieroglyphics, and she actually started to teach them how to empower their work with magic. The last was only done under her direct supervision and after she had carefully checked over everything. A single misplaced stroke could result in disaster, such as blowing off their arms instead of turning the desk yellow. All the same, Rosetta seemed exceptionally pleased with Holly's work, hinting to her and the other gifted students that she might be willing to give additional instruction next year if they kept going as they were. The professor even went as far as recommending supplementary volumes to their class text, blatantly saying that the books needed to be read to truly excel in her class.

Vector also suggested extra texts all but assigning them for homework. She held off though, and Holly had a distinct impression that this was some sort of test. Not the same as their written exams but a test nonetheless. The professor wanted to see how hard they were willing to work. In the meantime, she started them on the numerical foundation of spells. The students weren't yet up to manipulating the numbers, something that they probably wouldn't do until Easter at the earliest, but they still got to see how everything was put together. So far, they were only viewing the Levitation charm, but Vector promised that they'd move onto other first-year spells by next week once they had the hang of things.

The only classes Holly wasn't pleased with were Divination and Care of Magical Creatures. Trelawney was still predicting her demise with stunning regularity, stating that the girl would expire from all sorts of things. That list included death by mantichore, a plunge from the Astronomy Tower, rabid house-elves, and Theo's personal favourite: stampeding llamas.

Hagrid's class, on the other hand, was more a disappointment than anything else. While some of the creatures he presented were semi-interesting and dead useful magically speaking, he showed none of his normal enthusiasm. This was mostly due to the fact that he didn't really like anything unless it was enormous, vicious, or both. Further, all of his lustre was gone because of the Buckbeak fiasco, and he moped about like someone whose Kneazle had just died. Still, the giant man did find it in himself to give Draco dirty looks during lessons, although they were half-hearted and rather pitiful to see.

Other than that, things were going well. McGonagall made no hints that anything had occurred over break, and Holly gratefully followed her lead. Flitwick was his usual bubbly self, telling Holly that he had thoroughly enjoyed Christmas dinner. Sprout, in turn, was much perkier than she had been at the beginning of the school year, apparently having gotten over her disappointment with the Heir of Hufflepuff. Sinistra still had her head in the stars, and Binns could probably put a room full of insomniacs to sleep.

Remus was just as popular as ever. He had taken both of Holly's secrets very well, and they still continued to have a regular teatime

every Monday. Their conversations were even more open and relaxed than they had been before, but the girl felt a little twinge of guilt whenever she saw him. She really wished that Sirius would get his act together and let her tell Remus the truth about him. It would solve them all a lot of grief, not to mention make them a great deal happier.

Holly's anti-Dementor lessons began that weekend, and it was both better and worse than she had imagined. Somehow, she miraculously managed to form a very indistinct and virtually nonexistent shimmer when she first tried the Patronus charm, something that impressed Remus thoroughly. But she was still disappointed, hoping that there would be an easier solution to her problem. Nevertheless, the Slytherin resolutely promised herself that she would practice every opportunity she had, despite the fact that the lessons were ridiculously tiring. It didn't help that she heard her mother's dying screams whenever her boggart turned into a Dementor, and she was only mollified by the fact that she could always summon her parents again so that she could listen to them in a much more pleasant setting.

They played Ravenclaw the second Saturday of January. Cho Chang, the other Seeker, nearly had an aneurysm when she saw Holly's broom. So did the captain of their team, Roger Davies. Lee Jordan took it upon himself to become a not-so-subtle Firebolt advertisement throughout most of the match, much to McGonagall's unending annoyance. And true to form, or perhaps to spite the deputy headmistress just a little, Holly caught the Snitch in less than five minutes, beating Hogwarts' old record and preventing Ravenclaw from scoring more than a single goal. Snape himself came down to the changing rooms to congratulate the team, giving Holly a pleased nod before Titania pulled him aside to discuss something.

The party in the Common Room that night was exceptional, boisterous enough to put any Gryffindor or Weasley to shame. The twins themselves showed up halfway through, having actually been invited and bringing with them an assortment of goods from Hogsmeade. They gleefully joined in the celebration, not caring at all that they were partying with Slytherin House, especially since they were too busy enjoying Sophia Dolohov's illicit Firewhiskey stash.

Holly spent the beginning being practically dragged from one group of well-wishers to the next. Her friends attempted to run interference, but Blaise was conspicuously absent. She did, however, notice him speaking with both Titania and Solaris Morningstar, but Flint pulled her into a discussion about the match before she could make her way over. He was gone afterwards, and it was too crowded and noisy for her to open her mental senses to find him.

The party was not even close to winding down at eleven, though all of the first and most of the second-years had given up and gone to bed. Holly was lounging in a corner with Draco and Luna, who didn't seem to care that her House had lost, when she felt Blaise approaching. She looked up mid-way through Draco's explanation about an odd charm his mother had taught him over the holiday when a hand touched her shoulder, and the girl stilled completely when Blaise leaned down to whisper in her ear.

"Could you come with me for a little while?" he murmured in a low voice, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. "I need to talk with you."

Holly had a niggling tingle in her stomach, a small sense of foreboding. She unconsciously tried to reach for his thoughts, but she found them oddly distant. That only served to make her even more uneasy; regardless, she nodded and rose from her armchair, making her excuses to her other companions. Blaise caught her hand after she stood, gently pulling her along behind him.

Draco and Luna watched them leave, worriedly trading a look behind their backs. Holly didn't see it, too busy trailing after Blaise as he weaved his way around their Housemates. He made it to the far side in record time and went to the corridor with all the study rooms. The boy avoided the first few, choosing to go for the final door, and it was surprisingly empty inside, holding none of the partygoers that the rest surely had.

Holly had the distinct impression that either Blaise, or someone else, had cleared out the room.

The boy closed the door with a flick of his wand and subsequently layered a handful of spells on it. Holly nearly started when she

recognised several Privacy charms and a very powerful Locking spell. She mutely observed her friend as he pulled two chairs together, sitting where he directed. The girl thought that the silence between them would stretch on, but he surprised her once again.

“We need to have a little chat.” Blaise gazed at her with strange eyes.

“Fine,” Holly allowed, not entirely certain what was going on. “So chat.”

He sighed and opened his mouth, only to promptly close it. His eyelids drifted shut, and he crossed his arms over his chest almost defensively, rubbing a tired hand over his face.

“Blaise?” she questioned, almost rising from her seat. She stopped when he looked at her. “What’s wrong? It’s not your mum, is it? There’s nothing wrong with the baby, is there?”

He exhaled very slowly. “No, mum and the baby are fine. It’s just--” He shook his head, hands clenching and unclenching in a nervous gesture.

But why would Blaise be nervous? More importantly, why would he be nervous with her? He didn’t know about their bond, did he?

Holly had sinking sensation in her belly. A shiver went down her spine. That niggling feeling was back, worse than ever. And it deteriorated as he finally spoke again.

“It’s about the Dursleys.”

AN: I finally have a new computer, and everybody knows what that means. Regular updates. Hooray! Also, it has occurred to me that J.K. has pre-empted my epilogue. I actually had something similar planned, but who knows if I’ll use it now?

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Thirty-Four: Poisoned Rationality

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Thirty-Four: Poisoned Rationality

The door banged open, and Holly strode down the hallway, her face a stony mask. She marched back to the Common Room, only to hesitate as she stood in the doorway, not entirely certain what to do. But the sound of hurried footsteps at the corridor to her back urged her into the crowded room, the party from earlier still going strong. She eased her way inside, moving around various Housemates on her way to the exit. Several people attempted to attract her attention as she went by, but a single look, her green eyes glowing, was enough to make them rethink their actions. Even Fred and George were smart enough to back off, despite their clearly inebriated state.

As she approached the portrait, Holly belatedly noticed that both Titania and Solaris Morningstar were loitering nearby, and she stilled, debating her options. Her gaze flickered to the second exit, but what looked like most of the Quidditch team was directly in front of it with Theo just to the side. She quickly ducked behind Dimitri Dolohov, using the taller boy as a shield and doubling back to the girl's dorm. She made it into the hall and rushed back to her room with no one the wiser, somehow managing not to slam the door behind her. The girl all but stomped over to her bed, her stomach clenching. Her lungs burned as she pulled the curtain shut and spelled them with the most powerful Sealing charm she knew.

A few heartbeats later, she was underneath the covers fully dressed. Both her glasses and her shoes were gone, and the small part of her mind that wasn't focused on tingling of her eyes and throat wondered when she had taken them off. The thought flitted away as she buried her face into her pillow, fighting the stinging behind her eyelids.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. It was supposed to be easier now. She was away from the Dursleys ten months of the year, and she had magic to defend her the rest of the time. But somehow, without even intending, they still managed to hurt her, to ruin her life. And it just wasn't fair. None of it was fair.

Why couldn't everyone leave well enough alone?

(Flashback)

“Dursleys?” Holly repeated, obviously not following. It was as if Blaise had just said that one plus one equalled fifty-seven; it simply didn’t add up.

The boy tensed, taking his bottom lip between his teeth. “Yes,” he all but bit out.

She shook her head. “I don’t follow. What about them? They’re not dead, are they?” she questioned, voice taking on a very odd note.

“No... unfortunately,” he commented, though the last was in an undertone.

The girl waited a few minutes, but he didn’t say anything else.

“Well,” she prompted again, “what about them?”

He exhaled, and it was a weary sound, full of unease and some nameless emotion she couldn’t identify. Blaise shifted in his seat and reached for her hand, taking it in both of his. His fingers ran over her skin in a gesture that should have been reassuring and was anything but. And his eyes were clouded, mind still unreachable.

A tendril of dread shot down her spine, the sense of foreboding thick and heavy on the air. There was something at the edge of her mind, a half-warning that dissipated before it could truly be voiced.

“There’s no easy way to say this, so I’m just going to come out and say it.” He squeezed her hand tightly. “The Dursleys abuse you. Really abuse you. More than simply yelling at you. They hurt you physically.”

Holly’s heart stopped. “What did you--” She goggled at him, certain that she had to have heard that wrong. “What did you just say?”

“The Dursleys physically abuse you,” he repeated, brown eyes blazing and practically boring into hers.

“I never said that,” she contradicted. “I never--”

"Oh, don't deny it," Blaise interrupted fiercely. "I know that they do. I'm not an idiot, Holly. I can see the painfully obvious." He squeezed her hand again, the pressure almost painful. "You told me that they don't love you, but it goes beyond that. It goes beyond mean words and lies, beyond a smack here and there or even locking you in the cupboard. They hurt you."

"No," Holly refuted automatically, attempting to pull away.

Blaise held fast. "They broke your wrist this summer. If doesn't qualify, then I don't know what does."

"How do you--" she began but fell silent.

A single person knew for certain how that had happened. Sirius could only guess.

"It doesn't matter," Blaise put in, trying to redirect her attention.

Holly narrowed her eyes. "I think it does."

He sighed. "Tom told me. And Titania all but confirmed it."

"Titania?"

"Yes, Titania! As in the Prefect. As in related to an Auror." He shook his head. "Come on, Holly. You can't expect them to not notice. The Prefects and teachers are taught what to look for. You can hide it from most of them, but the ones who know you the best are bound to notice something's off."

Holly felt like she'd been hit by the Knight Bus. "How many people?" she croaked, unable to find enough air.

"Outside of Slytherin, I'd say less than a handful." Blaise shrugged elegantly in a gesture very reminiscent of Draco. "Flitwick suspects. He has to as much time as you spend with him. Pomfrey and the werewolf, too. But they'd definitely go to Professor Snape instead of confronting you directly. They wouldn't want too many adults ganging up on you at once, but they'll still have to tell Dumbledore."

Holly simply gaped, shaking her head mutely.

The boy added, "Titania and Solaris know. They've been asking questions, asking me if I know anything. If you'd ever said or hinted at anything."

"What is this then?" she put in heatedly, fire sparking inside. "An intervention? Did they put you up to this?"

Blaise had a pained look. "It's a warning, *amorcita*."

His grip on her fingers was now excruciating, a sharp ache that she somehow failed to register. And the fire in her belly flickered out as quickly as it had started.

"Warning... but I..."

Words seemed to fail her as realisation completely sunk in. Her entire world was unravelling before her eyes, and as much as she disliked the Dursleys, she needed the blood protection. This could ruin them and her by extension. Her very life depended on those wards.

"What do they know exactly?" the girl finally asked.

"Nothing solid," Blaise allowed slowly, "just supposition. They had some vague suspicions before this summer, but they couldn't be sure if it was paranoia on your part or how you were raised with the spectre of the Dark Lord hanging over your head. But this year – after that Marie woman or whatever her name was – it rather obvious that something was going on." He paused, letting that sink in.

Her hand was slack in his, and Blaise could practically see the thoughts flashing through her mind at light speed as she processed everything. She was pale, nearly translucent, and shaking very faintly. She felt like she was on an emotional rollercoaster, anxiety transforming to shock, shifting to a muted sense of panic.

But the worst was yet to come.

"And it's not just contained to the school," the boy continued after several minutes, trying to keep his voice soothing and even. "Auror

Shacklebolt didn't just talk to Titania. He actually contacted Professor Snape over Yule. Yes, Snape," he repeated at her incredulous look. "Our Head of House. Started asking all sorts of questions about your home life and if you seemed happy there."

"No," Holly said, but he wasn't entirely certain what she was denying.

Blaise went on, "They're going to ask, Hols. That's why I told you. They'll ask, and I don't want you to lie. You need to tell them the truth," he implored, his tight hold on her turning his knuckles white. "The Dursleys abuse you. They hurt you. And I can't stand to see you in pain, Holly."

"Well, if I don't go back, I'll be in a lot more pain in the future." Holly stated rather snidely, emotions getting the best of her, "Voldemort's not dead, in case you've forgotten. I need the blood protection."

"For Salazar's sake, Holly," Blaise bit out, his own nerves causing him to say it more violently than intended. "The only reason I even let them ship you back to those people this past summer was because of Tom, because he was with you. If he hadn't come along, I'd have simply taken you home with me. Blood wards be damned! Draco and Luna and the others felt the same way. That's why we all invited you to stay with us so much. We knew that you needed to stay there for a while, and we figured just over a month was the minimum. After that, you could leave. But by then, you were already gone!" He sucked in a deep breath through his mouth, nostrils flaring.

Everything was going too fast, getting out of hand, out of his control. He needed to restrain himself, calm both of them down. So much depended on what happened in the next few minutes, on convincing her that getting away from the Dursleys was for the best.

Blaise said gently, attempting to keep his cool, "I want you safe, and there are other ways to protect you, Holly. Other safer and more reliable methods. You don't have to live like that anymore." His fingertips ghosted over her skin reassuringly. "I wouldn't lie to you, not about this. You're my most important person, Holly. My bonded. I can't--"

He abruptly froze as he felt her jerk. And with a sinking sense of utter dread, Blaise realised what he had just revealed.

Holly blinked, mentally replaying the last few sentences in her head. There was no possible way that she had heard correctly. No way at all. She had only just recently grasped the true nature of their relationship, and Luna and Draco would never tell Blaise. They'd leave it to her to break the news, to beg for forgiveness.

She had to have heard wrong; that had to be it. But the expression on his face...

"Bonded?" Holly questioned with a growing sense of horror, this one rather different from what she had felt previously.

The silence that stretched between them seemed to last for an eternity. Blaise wouldn't even look at her, like he was ashamed. Or disgusted.

"Bonded?" she repeated helplessly, heart thudding in her chest. "You know. Maker, I'm sorry. I never meant--"

"I've known since just before second year," he interrupted, finding the floor eminently fascinating, "when we were researching Mind Magic. One of Papa Dante's books had a chapter on bond-mates. It didn't take much to figure out I was yours. All the signs pointed to it," Blaise admitted quietly.

Holly's mouth dropped open. "You knew about this. All this time... and you knew." Her voice was breathless, as though her lungs couldn't get enough air. "This is why you never let me read certain thoughts. You didn't... you didn't want me to find out about this," she continued in a rush as the truth dawned on her.

In her mind, she could almost feel his revulsion, imagination working overtime. And she hastily recoiled, withdrawing completely inside herself. She jumped to her feet, wrenching herself free of his grasp.

"Holly," he called, breathing hard as he unconsciously tried to reach her.

At her name, something inside of her snapped. And she was furious, angrier than she'd ever allowed herself to be. Years of lies, of neglect and worry and heartache all rushed to the forefront, something roaring behind in their wake.

"You've known for almost two years!" Holly accused, eyes stinging. "And I've been agonising over how to tell you! How to break it to you that I've basically tied us together for life! And you already knew!"

"Please don't be upset, Holly!" he cried, panting, palm over his ribcage.

"I'M NOT UPSET!" she shouted, the table behind them rattling ominously before she could rein herself in. "I'M... I'm... I..."

Holly made a choked sound and squeezed her eyes shut as tightly as she could. She swallowed thickly, mouth unexpectedly dry. In the next instant, she was by the door, not sure at all how that had happened. She pulled on the knob, but it wouldn't budge no matter how hard she turned.

All of the furniture in the room trembled now, wood creaking threateningly.

Blaise was directly behind her, reaching for her shoulder with shaky hands. "Please... just let me explain."

She didn't answer, only tried harder, frustration building. There was something inside her, something angry and hurt and aching to be free. It tore around her mind, battering at her shields. And she simply let it lose, not caring anymore.

With a flare of power, the spells on the door dissolved, all but shattering.

She was through in an instant and out into the corridor. The boy tried to follow her but something, some invisible power pushed him back. It was all he could do to keep his feet against the unrelenting and yet strangely gentle force.

“Holly, wait!!” Blaise called, stumbling after her and almost into the wall.

But she was already gone.

(End of flashback)

She groaned as the memory washed over her, quivering like a leaf in the wind. The girl tried to fight her pounding heart, the empty void in her mind where Blaise’s presence normally was, but she couldn’t manage it. She hurt... hurt so very badly. Holly just couldn’t contain it any longer, finally losing the battle with her tears. She buried her head further into her pillow and wept.

Sometime later, she awoke to the feel of a hand stroking her hair and the sound of murmurings. The girl blinked dazedly as she laid on her side, brain trying to process what was going on. Her eyes were crusty and watery, heavy to lift, and there was a terrible ache in her chest. Her mental abilities were silent, closed off and tightly contained. And Holly had every intention of leaving them that way. At least for now.

The girl inhaled through her mouth as she came to full wakefulness. She finally noticed the dip in the mattress just behind her, the weight of a person sitting on her bed. Belatedly, she heard singing, a soft lullaby in a male voice. Holly rolled over slowly and tilted her head upwards.

“Morning, pup,” Sirius said, smiling down at her. He was leaning against her headboard, hand still hovering from where he had been threading his fingers through her hair.

“Er... morning,” Holly returned, squinting in the dim light. She didn’t have her glasses on, and that was making it rather difficult to see. “What’re you doing here?”

“Luna brought me last night.” He resumed stroking her hair, grin widening as she unconsciously leaned into the touch. “They knew you were upset, and nothing the girls tried could get your hangings unstuck.”

“Oh...” Holly strained for something else to say. When nothing was forthcoming, she lapsed into an awkward silence.

Sirius seemed content to let it remain, not the least bit perturbed.

“What if someone had seen you?” she asked after several heartbeats, shifting away from him to sit up. She eased out of her bed, going to the far wall that was also curtained off from the rest of the room.

The Animagus watched her without comment, eyes drifting half-shut. His hand dropped down to his side.

“I’ve an alarm on the door. If anyone had come in, I would’ve transform before they saw anything. We were fine for just last night.” He leaned forward, back popping noisily as he straightened.

Holly blushed. Sirius must have spent the entire night sitting up with her.

But a warmth spread through her stomach and chest, dulling part of the pain and letting her breathe easier. She couldn’t quite help the pleased grin that tugged at her lips. It was a nice feeling, she decided. Nice to know that someone would be there for her. She’d never had an adult do such a thing for her before. The Dursleys hadn’t cared all the times she was half-dead, much less upset about something. Only her friends cared, and the only one of them to see her cry was...

The man unexpectedly yawned then, redirecting her attention. He was leaning against her pillows again, head lolling slightly as he watched her pick up her wand and glasses from the bedside table. Undoubtedly, he was tired. But knowing him, Sirius wouldn’t sleep until she was gone.

Well, she needed to get dressed anyway.

“I’m going to take a bath now,” the girl informed him, waving her wand and dispelling the Sticking charms on her bed hangings.

Sirius nodded. There was a muffled pop as he transformed into Snuffles, and he contentedly curled up on her pillow.

Holly, in turn, peeked out into the rest of the room, and seeing that all the other girls were still fast asleep, she quickly pulled back her curtains. She grabbed a change of clothes and was about to leave but hesitated, stepping back over to her bed.

"Thank you, Sirius," she murmured, scratching underneath his chin before turning for the bathroom.

He was asleep by the time she returned, little kitten chest rising and falling steadily. Holly just smirked and departed, Cynthia showing some signs of stirring as she passed. She avoided the Common Room, wary of an ambush by any well-meaning Housemates and instead choosing to sneak out through Slytherin's passageways. It was a bit late for breakfast, even though it was the weekend. Plus, she didn't really want to see anyone at the moment, so Holly headed for the kitchens. Sirius had told her where they were, and the house-elves were always delighted whenever someone stopped in. Besides, she could nip in and out with no one the wiser.

Her plans were foiled, however, just as she reached the entrance. She felt two people coming down a side hallway in her direction, but a quick survey of her mental senses revealed that it was only the Weasley twins. Holly was unworried, actually reaching up to tickle the pear in the painting when they unexpectedly glomped onto her.

"Did you--" Fred began with wide eyes.

--hear the news--" George continued, moving her to face them.

"Holly?" they finished together.

She shook her head but stilled at their expressions. Their faces were grave, serious, and Holly felt a bead of tension in her belly. They looked like someone had just died.

"Sirius Black was spotted in the castle last night."

Holly felt her insides go cold, stomach plummeting to settle somewhere around her ankles. But thankfully, the twins completely misinterpreted the expression of abject horror she couldn't keep from her face.

“Don’t worry, Hols,” George hastily assured her, wrapping an arm around her suddenly numb shoulders. “He’s gone now.”

His twin nodded, adding in his own arm. The twins pulled her back to the painting of the fruit and into the kitchens, setting her down at the first table. The house-elves buzzed around them excitedly, setting out a full breakfast for all three students without even being asked.

“T’was Ronnikins who saw him,” Fred said after a moment. “And in the Gryffindor Common Room!”

“What?” the Slytherin questioned loudly, knowing that to be impossible. Sirius hadn’t been anywhere near there last night, and she sincerely doubted he had the ability to be in two places at once.

“We know,” Fred went on. “It’s so damned weird. Twice, he’s been seen around Gryffindor.”

“But Ron saw him?” Holly prompted, mind whirling with improbabilities. She absentmindedly reached down to take the cup of tea a house-elf offered to her. “Oh, thank you.”

The creature beamed and bowed before toddling away excitedly.

George just shrugged, picking up a piece of toast. “Well, Ron saw someone. He heard them poking about downstairs when he went for a glass of water.”

“Thought it was us, you see,” Fred interrupted fluidly. “Thought we were finally coming back from the party in Slytherin.” He helped himself to some eggs.

His brother continued, “So he went down to the Common Room, and there he was... **‘a hunched over man wrapped in a shadowy cloak,’**” he said in a dramatic voice as though directly quoting someone. “And it was dark. He couldn’t see the bloke’s face.”

“But he ran out through the portrait hole when he saw Ron,” Fred finished after swallowing rather noisily.

“And what about the portrait? That crazy fellow who replaced the Fat Lady?” Holly questioned with an odd sense of relief. “Did he see who it was?”

“Nope. But he heard the man read out all of the passwords.” At Holly’s confused look, George elaborated, “Neville had written them down for the week because the barmy knight keeps changing them. Mind you, that’s only after he thinks up ridiculously complex ones.” He paused to reach for the strawberry jelly.

Fred added, “The teachers searched the entire castle again last night, but since the students were already in the dorms they didn’t move them. I thought Flitwick was going to have heart attack when he found us staggering back to the Common Room. But he was nice enough to cast a Sobering spell and a few Refreshing charms before he shipped us off to McGonagall.” He took a drink of his juice.

“Yeah,” his twin cut in, “and she was so focused on Black that she didn’t even dock points for missing curfew. Truthfully, I think that she was relieved we hadn’t run into him ourselves.”

The two Weasleys paused then, helping themselves to more breakfast. Holly just let them eat mind going over the possibilities as she absentmindedly munch on a piece of bacon.

It had to have been Pettigrew. There was no other possible answer, but that one didn’t even make much sense. Was it an accident? Had he transformed back for some reason, only to be caught? But why would he do that; why would he chance it?

Holly didn’t understand. Pettigrew was safe as a rat; as far as he knew, only Sirius was even aware that he was still alive. What could possibly be worth the risk of being seen?

Unless he had wanted to be seen. Perhaps he was trying to frame Sirius again to keep up the story of him being dangerous and close to Hogwarts. But again, why? Why not simply run away? Hide somewhere? Did he have some reason to believe that Sirius was still nearby? Was he trying to get Sirius caught?

She continued in that same vein for quite a while, still distractedly eating. And only Fred's hand waving in front of her face sometime later managed to derail her thoughts.

"Alright there, Holly?" he questioned, exchanging a look with his brother. "We didn't mean to frighten you."

George nodded. "Just thought you should know. We weren't certain if the professors would give you the full story or not."

"Besides," Fred added cheerfully, "no matter how bad it gets. You're still having a better week than Ron."

"Poor, Ronnikins," George said, clucking his tongue and not sounding the least bit sorry. "First, Slytherin creams Ravenclaw, all but assuring you the Quidditch Cup. Then, he sees Sirius Black. And this morning, he woke up only to find that Hermione's cat had eaten Scabbers."

The next few days passed with an edgy sort of tension. Security in the castle increased tenfold, and Flitwick was even seen spelling the front doors to recognise a picture of Sirius. The Fat Lady had been restored to her usual place, now guarded by a pair of security trolls. Ron Weasley was the new celebrity of Hogwarts, but his excitement about this fact was diluted by his sadness at the apparent death of Scabbers.

As for Pettigrew himself, there was no sign of him. Sirius couldn't find him anywhere on the Marauder's Map, actually using a special function of it to specifically search for him. All evidence pointed to Crookshanks as the executioner, but Sirius claimed that the cat was innocent. And it wasn't as if Pettigrew hadn't faked his death before.

Still, for all appearances, the man had vanished.

Sirius stated that it was for the best, that Holly and the other students were safer this way, but she could tell that he was disheartened. It seemed that his chance of catching the rat had slipped through his fingers and his freedom right along with it. He took to spending progressively larger periods of time in Slytherin's passageways, no

longer bouncing around the dorm in his Snuffles disguise. He was quiet, solemn and serious, not at all like his normal boisterous self. And even his goddaughter had trouble getting him out of his funk.

In the interim, Holly's mental abilities were unruly, to say the least. And it was all that she could do to keep them contained, maintaining her strongest shielding and not even letting a whisper of her power through. But it took its toll on her, making her tired and somewhat irritable, not that much of anyone was around to notice.

This, of course, was probably due to the fact that she avoided Blaise like the plague, nipping into all of her classes just before the bell and sitting in the back. She ducked out after lessons dismissed, using her extensive knowledge of hidden passages to elude him further. She stayed away from the Common Room, all but living with Sirius during her free time, and only venturing back to the dorm to make curfew. This served to help her evade the Prefects, most notably Titania, but also her friends. She didn't want to face them, not yet, not as she tried to figure out just how much they knew, how closely they had been watching her. She even kept away from Tom, dumping him on Draco without explanation and refusing to take his diary back. The girl didn't want to speak to him either, displeased with his own role in current events.

Luna was the only one she really interacted with, and that was mostly because some of the Ravenclaws had recently decided to renew their teasing again. Holly couldn't in good conscious leave her friend and fellow Mind Mage to hang, no matter how strained their relationship. Further, while Luna definitely sensed the distance between them, she made no mention of it, going about in her normal albeit dreamy and fanciful manner.

Quidditch practice was a tense affair on Tuesday, especially when Titania insisted on walking back to the dorms together. Holly, however, was saved by a passing Remus, and she willingly went with him to have a late afternoon tea, making up for missing their usual meeting time the day before. His company was actually enjoyable with no undercurrent of inquest or silent inquisition. Even his mind was blissfully free of such things, and if she hadn't known better, the Slytherin wouldn't have suspected at all. Still, there was something in

the way he watched her, in the way his eyes narrowed as he looked at her.

Wednesday bled into Thursday. Potions class was a trial in and of itself. Professor Snape gave no indication that anything was the matter, which only served to set Holly further on edge. It was very difficult to ascertain where she stood with the man. His mind was as always closed in, a veritable blank slate with very seldom and fleeting and possibly even imagined almost-ripples.

Thankfully, all the rest of the teachers were much easier to read, and most were too preoccupied with the castle's recent intruder. Trelawney wouldn't have noticed if Sirius danced naked in her class; Vector was focused on her subject, more interested in Holly's prowess with numbers. Rosetta, likewise, had other things on her mind, brain practically singing with enthusiasm over her recent trip to Greece during the holiday and all the interesting runes she had seen. Flitwick was his usual jubilant self, though his smile had a hint of strain to it whenever Holly saw him in the hallways or class. McGonagall shared a similar condition, though the girl could hardly fault her. Gryffindor did seem to be bearing the brunt of things this year.

Hagrid was blithely oblivious as usual. In all fairness, he was engrossed with Buckbeak's defence, receiving some half-hearted help from a few people and a near dissertation from Hermione. Regardless, he did invite Holly over Friday afternoon, and she agreed for a lack of anything better to do, not to mention that it got her out of the castle.

Their visit was odd, to say the least, since she usually had her friends along with her. Hagrid thankfully did most of the talking, leaving her to nod and add noises of affirmation at the appropriate intervals. She caught a few snippets of conversation, something about a fight between Ron and Hermione. Yet, most of it was beyond her, too far gone in her thoughts to really listen. Holly merely let his rough but oddly pleasant voice wash over her, but it did nothing to soothe her frazzled nerves or centre her mind.

Sometime later and certainly after sunset, Hagrid escorted her back to the castle. She briefly toyed with going to dinner, but the rock cakes she had politely nibbled on earlier had left her belly slightly queasy with an odd taste in her mouth. That option out, she headed for the Common Room, hoping to nip up to her dorm and simply go to bed. She was tired, mind anxious and yearning without the comfort of her bonded present. Her very thoughts ached with his loss, like they had for the entire past week and just as they had during the summer months.

The Slytherin descended the stairs from the Entrance Hall to the dungeons, footsteps heavy and weary. She went by a small alcove, one that she often visited when using her Time Turner. But Holly was preoccupied, too preoccupied to notice the person inside. Or perhaps she simply didn't want to see.

A hand reached out for her as she passed. She automatically whirled around, wand dropping to her fingers before being unceremoniously knocked away. Her eyes widened, even as she allowed a few of her shields to drop and mentally reached for it.

"You!"

Amorcita: little love

AN: Wow! This is a really dialogue heavy chapter, but that can't be helped. A lot of this has been building up for quite some time. And this was a ridiculously difficult chapter to write. I probably went through three different drafts.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Thirty-Five: C'est La Vie

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Thirty-Five: C'est La Vie

"Are you trying to get hexed?" Holly asked after several short, quick breaths.

Blaise sheepishly bent to retrieve her wand, which he had accidentally knocked away. "I'm sorry. I honestly thought you'd noticed me before."

Holly inhaled deeply, still trying to calm her rapidly beating heart. "I was a bit distracted."

The boy snorted. "I can see that." He somewhat sheepishly returned her wand and shifted from one foot to the other. "Look, Holly. Can we talk?" Blaise held up a hand to quiet her automatic response. "Please. Please just give me a chance to explain."

She closed her mouth with an almost audible snap and considered. Perhaps it was time that they talked, really talked. The silent treatment and avoidance had gone on long enough. She was tired of it all, mentally and physically exhausted.

Her gaze flickered to her companion.

Simply put, Blaise looked awful. There were dark circles underneath his eyes, evidence that he hadn't been sleeping well, if at all. His eyes themselves were dull, normal sparkle gone. His face was wane, thinner than she remembered, and his robes hung a bit looser than normal.

A trickle of unease shot down Holly's spine at that. Now that she thought about it, he'd been slowly losing weight since the end of break. He hadn't exactly been chubby before, but it was rather obvious that he was becoming thinner. And the girl had been so focused on other things that she hadn't commented earlier, though she definitely should have.

Heavy guilt settled into her belly with that thought, but she didn't fight it. In truth, it was no less than she deserved.

Finally, Holly nodded. "Not here though."

She motioned him to follow as she moved down the corridor to one of the entrances to Slytherin's secret passageways. The girl could hear his footsteps just behind her as she travelled all the way to Sirius' room. Thankfully, the Animagus wasn't there, and Holly plopped on the bed he had transfigured for himself, knowing he wouldn't mind.

Silence lingered between them for several minutes.

"I'm sorry, you know," Blaise murmured at last, easing down beside her. "For how things turned out. That wasn't the way I intended to tell you." He turned to look at her fully.

She sighed. "I know. I knew that then, but..." Holly shook her head. "I was so angry. Just so damn angry."

"Yeah," he responded ironically, "I kind of figured that. What with the furniture shaking and all."

The girl rolled her eyes. "There was that," she allowed. "I should have taken it better. Much better. It wasn't like I didn't already know. I just had no idea how to tell you, but I suppose that you had much the same problem."

"I did," he agreed. "I wasn't certain how you would take it. And there was always something else getting in the way. The attacks last year and the whole thing with Tom. Then, Sirius and Pettigrew." Blaise rubbed a shaky hand over his face, but it did little to help the tiredness visible. "Always other problems to deal with first, and it kept being pushed back. The same's true with what I said about the Dursleys and all."

Holly tensed beside him. However, she relaxed when it became clear that this wasn't to be a repeat of their last conversation. Blaise let her response pass without comment, gaze moving from her to some point on the floor.

"But I am sorry, Holly. I truly am. I just... You have to understand..." He hesitated.

"Yes?" she prompted when he seemed reluctant to go on.

"I never really had friends before you," he replied after a moment, tone quiet and strangely distant. "Well, I did... but I didn't. Most of the time I was with my family, my parents and sisters. Occasionally, I met up with cousins or other relatives."

Holly furrowed her brow, not entirely certain where this was going.

"Even then," Blaise went on, "I didn't see them much. We kept us to ourselves mostly." He exhaled very softly. "But that was okay. I was happy. We were happy."

"Blaise," the girl began, "I don't--"

He interrupted, raising his voice to be heard over her, "What I mean is, we were always very close." The boy shrugged helplessly at her still confused look. "I've had four fathers, Holly. Four," he repeated, tone suddenly becoming fierce. "Most people are lucky to even have one. The first – my biological father – I don't even remember. I never even knew him. I barely even recall my first stepfather. But I knew Papa Arius, just like I know Papa Dante. I love them, really love them."

His eyes were fixed on the wall, staring but not seeing. He took a very deep breath.

"But they always... They always," he stumbled over the words, and her hand unconsciously sought his. "Die. They always die. They keep dying. I can't keep a father. Can't keep anyone."

Holly was still next to him, not even daring to move now. She wanted to say something, anything, but she couldn't think of the words. Her mind was blank, completely and utterly, struggling to work.

"Everyone keeps dying," Blaise stated, words heavy and hard. "They keep leaving us. My mum. My sisters. They always leave us." He added in a brutal whisper, "Leave me!"

And finally, the root of the problem.

Her head whipped around so quickly her hair nearly snapped her in the nose. She opened her mouth, only to promptly close it. She wanted to reach for the boy beside her, but she couldn't, brain all but

frozen. Her mind tried to stretch out, wanted to desperately. She just couldn't manage it, the blocked bond between them aching with his absence.

"You have no idea what it was like for me," Blaise continued, breathing hard now. "With this bond. To know that someone trusted me so much, to know **you** trusted me that much. To know that you'd never leave. That you couldn't." He finally moved to look at her. "That maybe... maybe you'd never even want to go."

Holly goggled at him, mouth actually hanging open. "Blaise!? Blaise, I..." Words outright failed her, and she just shook her head in denial.

The boy bit his lip. "I didn't want you to leave," he admitted.

Her mind started at that.

"Bl--What?" Holly all but demanded, "What do you mean? Leave? You really thought that? **How** could you even think that?" Her face betrayed both her shock and hurt, fingers holding his so tightly that her skin was white.

"I was scared, all right," Blaise shot back, a wild glint to his eyes. "Happy now? I've admitted it. I was afraid. I thought that if you knew, you'd want to break the bond. Oh, it'd probably be for some very good reasons," he put in hastily, as if trying to assure her or maybe himself. "I mean, we're both just children. And this kind of bond's as binding as a blood adoption or some marriages! I know; I looked it up, the laws and everything. But if I could just explain to you what it was, what it really meant, you wouldn't break the connection."

"I won't!" she all but shouted in return, fingernails leaving little gouges on his skin. "I don't want to break it. I never did, not even when I first found out. I wouldn't even know where to begin, and I honestly thought you'd be mad at me for tying us together. For doing it without asking."

It was his turn to be surprised.

"Oh," he said simply, deflating in an instant. "Never? Not at all?"

“No,” the girl replied in a high-pitched tone. “Not once! Not even for one second.”

And to support her claim, she opened the bond between them fully. All the barriers instantly fell, and the part of her that had been aching for the last week was instantly soothed.

Blaise smiled with obvious relief. His head was swimming with the sudden rush, pleasant and hazy. But all too quickly his relief morphed into embarrassment, cheeks flushing even more. His hand nervously twisted in hers.

He coughed. “Well, I... er... I feel like a bit of moron. More than a bit, really. I should have known better. I **do** know you better than that.” Blaise muttered under his breath, “Stupid. So stupid.”

She countered, squeezing his hand tightly, “It’s not stupid. Only logical, I suppose. It makes sense, and we all have things that we fear. Are afraid of how our friends will react to certain things.” Holly had a brief flash of the Dursleys. “I worry, too.”

The boy squeezed back. “We’ll work it all out. I promise,” he added, as though reading her mind.

Perhaps he was. Or maybe it was the bond between them. In the end, it amounted to much the same.

Blaise unexpectedly let out a relieved laugh, leaning forward until their noses were barely touching. He pressed his forehead against hers, brown eyes staring into green.

“Stay with me, Hols.”

Holly’s throat was tight, but there was an obvious smile on her lips. “Always.”

The rest of the month flew by. Holly was welcomed back to their group of friends with open arms but little awkwardness. Luna simply hummed and charmed her own hair blue, while Draco sighed and

looked very put upon. Tom gave her a superior smirk before returning to his book of the moment, only to growl when he realised that Sirius had charmed it blank when he wasn't looking. Milli and the rest just took everything in stride, thankfully not commenting at all.

They picked up their magic sessions again, working on various spells and helping each other with homework and the like. Sirius' input was invaluable, more than worth its weight in gold. His lessons were also a thousand times more interesting than most of their classes, filled with neat anecdotes of his schooldays and various pranks, including a number that went horribly wrong.

Holly received a package from Erendiria the last day of January with a formal invitation to attend the birth of her child. The Zabini matriarch also included a long letter detailing how much all of them had missed her over Yule and looked forward to seeing her in April when the baby was due. The woman went on to ask Holly how she was holding up, not once directly mentioning Sirius and the recent break-ins but managing to get the point across all the same. She even went so far as to explicitly state that both she and Dante could be called upon to go to Hogwarts should Holly need them.

Hufflepuff lost to Gryffindor by a very narrow margin the first weekend of February, which was good news according to Marcus Flint. The cup was theirs as long as Gryffindor didn't outscore them by more than a fifty points in the final match. And this, in turn, meant that their captain had relaxed a bit on their practices, a godsend since Holly was doing her utmost to avoid Titania.

Holly evaded the rest of the Prefects as well, continuing to stay away from the Common Room and dorms. Thankfully, almost everyone was still talking about Sirius' supposed attack on Gryffindor. This served to continually distract most of the teachers, though Professor Snape did seem to look at her more than normal. His dark eyes had a tendency to flicker towards her at odd times, like when she was just about to add the newt eyes to her Stabilising solution or in the middle of stirring her Babbling brew. But try as she might, the Slytherin could never tell what he was thinking.

Draco continued his crusade to teach Holly how to block spells with her Mind Magic. She secretly thought that he took a perverse pleasure in having an excuse to fling spell after spell at her. However, that delight was morphing into frustration at her inability to redirect the magic consistently. The whole thing was a great deal more difficult than they had originally imagined, and Holly had yet to learn the trick of it. As such, she was now rather adept at dodging and casting shields.

Valentine's day came and went, thankfully without any of the embarrassing theatrics of the previous year. Holly found an anonymous card stashed away in her bag, one that made her stomach flutter oddly when she read over it. She couldn't quite figure out who it was from but figured that it was most likely a fellow Slytherin since she only let her things out of sight at the dorm. The other girls were fascinated by her valentine, which she refused to let them read, most giving dreamy sighs at just the thought. Milli simply snorted and gave her patented glare to anyone who so much as glanced at her friend for the rest of the day. She started with Theo, who only wanted to ask a question about their Charms homework.

February faded into March. The Prefects and professors had yet to make their move, but as the days progressed, Holly felt that it was only a matter of time. Everyone settled into a quiet but vaguely tense mood, the veritable calm before the storm. Most of the Gryffindors, especially the younger years, seemed to be on the verge of panic, half-convinced that Sirius Black would return to attack them again. Fred and George, however, found the entire situation hilarious and took to all manners of mischief. The last prank alone, which involved some rather interesting spellwork, a matching pair of dark cloaks, and a handful of terrified first-years, earned them a month's worth of detention with McGonagall and a Howler from their mother.

Buckbeak's trial swiftly approached, scheduled for the middle of April. Hagrid was beside himself with worry, his mind not on his classes at all. His students even spent one forgettable lesson doing nothing but tending to Fang. In all honesty, their books themselves were more interesting than anything else. That was even considering the fact that the things still insisted on biting and tearing into their owners.

Hermione researched vigorously for Buckbeak's defence, using it as an excuse to avoid her Housemates and Ron more specifically. The redhead himself was caught between mourning the apparent loss of his beloved rat and plotting revenge against Crookshanks. The two Gryffindors were seen several times arguing over their respective pets and the cat's culpability in Scabbers' death. There were even rumours of Hermione threatening to curse Ron if he so much as touched Crookshanks.

Neville stayed out of it for the most part, wisely keeping his mouth shut on the matter. He sat with Fred and George at mealtimes and other students during lessons. He had even started sharing a table with Holly and her friends in Divination, but she honestly didn't mind by this point. He had already apologised more than enough. Besides, he was rather enjoyable to be around most of the time, and he willingly distracted Trelawney whenever she started in on her death predictions. In recompense, the Slytherins even let him sit with them in Ancient Runes so that he wouldn't have to be near Hermione.

As for Pettigrew, he had yet to make an appearance on the Marauder's Map. Sirius studied it regularly, searching for his former friend without any luck. The Animagus was disheartened, to say the least, but he was holding up surprisingly well. Holly thought that perhaps he was somewhat relieved Pettigrew was gone since she and her friends were now safer for it. Still, Sirius' freedom was a steep price to pay for her security.

Further, the Animagus still hadn't gotten up the courage to speak with Remus, in spite of Holly's ultimatum. The Slytherin honestly thought that she would have to break the news on her own, but she vowed to wait until after Easter in the hopes that Sirius would keep his word.

Anti-Dementor lessons continued, but they were more draining than a half-dozen Quidditch practices. After her spectacular first try with the spell, her advancement came in stutters and bursts. The indistinct mist was more defined now, vaguely resembling something with four legs, shades of white and silver instead of just a light grey haze. Nevertheless, her overall progress was slow, and it didn't help that so many other things were on her mind. Remus was supportive, trying to assure Holly that her progress alone was remarkable, but the

Slytherin was still discouraged. The Dementors were terrible, awful things, and she didn't like being so defenceless against them.

As such, Holly was somewhat down the next Hogsmeade weekend, especially after she spent the morning working on her Patronus. Draco stayed with her while everyone else went to the village, Blaise needing to pick up a gift for Dante's birthday. The blond of course wanted to use this rare opportunity to work on blocking spells, ending up with their usual mixed results.

"Come on, Potter," Draco taunted as he hurriedly cast again. "You can do better than that. If you can block that ponce Lockhart's magic, than you can do this, too." He cast a yellowish-orange curse with a wave of his wand, following up with a jet of red light.

Holly growled and sidestepped. Both spells overshot, connecting with the wall behind her and dissipating. She didn't notice, too busy dodging the next volley. The girl managed to duck the first hex, but she couldn't outmanoeuvre the following curse. Instead, she put up her hand, pushing against the magic with her mind or trying to at least. Most of the spell deflected but not all of it.

"This isn't exactly easy, you know," she shot back, gritting her teeth as some of the curse's excess energy washed over her, making her hair stand on end. "And I'm tired. I had another Dementor lesson with Remus earlier. Remember? Those are more tiring than a week's worth of Quidditch practices. **Combined.**"

"Excuses, excuses, Potter." The boy scoffed and let loose another barrage. "I bet Tom could do this with his eyes closed."

Holly lifted an eyebrow, even as she ducked. "Hardly. For one, Tom's not even a telekinetic. Two, his eyelids are translucent, so he'd be able to see the spells anyway."

Draco paused, rubbing his chin with his free hand. "Hm... I suppose that's true." He studied her for a second, taking in her obvious exhaustion and the sweat collecting along her hairline. "Well, that's enough for today then," he permitted haughtily.

“Why thank you, your majesty,” she replied with a half-smirk. “How magnanimous of you.” Holly hobbled over to a bench by the near wall. “I’ll be so glad when I manage to master this. If I ever do, that is.”

The boy just laughed and came over to sit beside her. “You will,” he assured her. “You always do. You’re Holly Potter, lady and master of the impossible. If you can defeat a Basilisk, you can definitely block spells.”

“I hardly think this falls on the same scale,” Holly retorted good-naturedly. “Fawkes did most of the hard work. I just ran around and tried not to die.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “I know better than that. The bird wasn’t the one to pull Gryffindor’s sword from the Sorting hat or the one who saved that Weasley girl. Besides, it’s not like you haven’t done this before.”

“Well,” she allowed with an exhale, “I wasn’t really thinking about it at the time. I was just trying to keep the dandy peacock from Obliviating both you and Blaise.”

“And we appreciate it. Really, we do,” he sincerely added, grey eyes studying her.

The girl didn’t reply. She merely wiped a tired hand over her forehead.

“Maybe you should cut back on the lessons with Lupin,” the boy suggested a few seconds later. “They don’t seem to be doing you much good anyway. I mean, they’re exhausting, and you still can’t produce a Patronus.”

Holly shook her head wearily. “I can’t. I have to do this.” She sighed. “You know firsthand how horrible those things are. I have to be able to protect myself.”

“I know. I remember,” he said with an odd note to his voice. “You very nearly passed out. We were worried something fierce. You just fell and started shaking.”

“What about you?” Holly questioned gently. “I saw... er... on the train.”

The blond's head whipped around, and he gazed at her with wide eyes. "You saw that?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean--"

"No," he interrupted. "No, it's fine. It's not your fault."

Quiet settled between them, lingering and somewhat edgy. The girl shifted ever-so-slightly.

"I hear my parents, you know," Holly said after a few heartbeats.

Draco stirred beside her, and when he didn't say anything, she continued.

"Mostly my mum. She's begging Voldemort to kill her and not me." Green eyes tracked over a design on the far wall. "I didn't realise at first, but after the summoning, I recognised her voice."

The boy let out a small sigh. "I see my uncle. Arius," he clarified, "my father's younger brother."

Holly turned her head to look at him but remained silent.

"He died when I was seven. My parents said that he fell down the stairs and broke his neck, but I know that's a lie." His hands knotted in his robe. "I saw Reznik Lestrage at our house that day. I had slipped away from my tutor, you see. Didn't want to learn about the Goblin War of 1612." Draco let out a mirthless laugh, bitter and heartbroken. "I heard Uncle and Lestrage arguing and came over to see what was going on. Before I could round the corner, they started duelling. The next thing I know was that he's dead, but I didn't see it. I'm not sure what spell Lestrage used. I just hid in one of the secret passages until he was gone."

"Draco..." Holly began. "I... I don't really know what to say." She looked at him helplessly. "I'm sorry."

He just inclined his head. "I know. Don't worry about it."

“Do... Do you know why Lestrangle killed him?” she asked, putting a tentative hand on his arm.

“A bunch of former Death Eaters were up to something – rigging an election, I think.” Draco shrugged elegantly, but there was tension visible in his shoulders. “Uncle Arius said no. He refused to do what they wanted. That’s why Lestrangle killed him.” His gaze flickered back to her. He seemed old in that moment, far more than his years allowed.

“My parents were very afraid afterward,” he continued softly, “terrified that something similar would happen to me. They placed a bunch of new wards around the house and blocked all visitors. Aunt Eren was devastated, wouldn’t let her children out of sight or leave their house for almost a full year. She couldn’t even go to the funeral.”

The girl paused. “Aunt Eren?” She closed her eyes very slowly, a creeping suspicion going up her spine. “Wait. Eren as in Erendiria Zabini?”

“Yes, she’s my aunt.” Draco blinked at the change in subject. “Didn’t you know? Did Blaise never tell you? Uncle Arius was her fifth husband.”

“Are you saying that your uncle – Lucius Malfoy’s brother – was Belle and Lexie Zabini’s biological father?” Holly asked, completely dumbfounded.

She instantly brought to mind a picture of the girls. Isabella was darker, closely resembling Blaise and their mother. However, Alexia indeed had a rather Malfoyish look to her. Blonde with the same light green eyes Arius had possessed in Draco’s memory.

“And Blaise’s stepfather,” the boy put in with a nod. “That’s how I knew him when we were younger.” Draco ran a hand through his hair. “The girls barely remember him. Lexie was only a baby, not even a year old when he died.”

Holly was flabbergasted. “No wonder everyone thinks that Eren Zabini is a Black Widow,” she mused with very wide eyes. “Her husbands really do keep dying in horrible and suspicious manners.”

Draco shrugged. "Tell me about it."

March continued on at a muted pace, interrupted only by a few notable incidents. A particularly tough strain of Goblin flu went through the school, taking down both Professors Sinastra and Rosetta, not to mention a number of the students. Remus caught a very mild case, his werewolf strength allowing him to get over it in just a few days, but the rest of the school wasn't nearly as lucky. Milli was hit the hardest out of their immediate group, missing a week's worth of lessons. She was rather fortunate, however, not having to be sent to Saint Mungo's like Dimitri Dolohov and his sister Sophia.

The Hufflepuff Quidditch team was decimated, leaving them only their Keeper and Seeker and forcing them to play their reserve players during their match with Ravenclaw. The Eagles were equally unfortunate, losing a Beater and two Chasers. This all cumulated in one of the most bizarre games anyone could recall in recent memory. It lasted most of the day, ending only when Cedric caught the Snitch just before sunset.

Hermione caused an uproar in Divination by first mouthing off and subsequently walking out on Trelawney. The teacher was reportedly so upset that she was force-fed a Calming draught by Madam Pomfrey. Hermione herself didn't seem to care, and it became rather obvious to Holly that the stress of all her classes was getting to the other girl. The Gryffindor was well on her way to a breakdown. She still staunchly refused to use the Time Turner to get extra sleep or to have enough time to do her homework. It didn't help that she was talking Muggle Studies on top of the other four additional classes. Perhaps without Divination, she would manage better, but Holly had her doubts.

The incident with Trelawney did serve to bridge the gap between Ron and Hermione, the redhead impressed with his friend's behaviour. Neville, on the other hand, was still uneasy around them. Their repaired relationship did nothing to curb the pair's usual bickering, and the round-faced boy clearly remained cool towards them, sticking with Fred and George or his other year-mates.

Easter came with a great deal of relief that year, despite all the homework piled on them by the professors. Most of the students went home over the short break, finding it a much needed rest from all the drama. Holly, as usual, stayed at Hogwarts, contenting herself with the sweets Eren and Dante sent, not to mention the huge chocolate eggs Mrs. Weasley mailed to her. Poor Errol needed an entire day just to recover from the sheer trial of carrying them.

The Saturday before the holiday, Holly was in the Common Room for once, roped into a chess match with Mordecai Montague, a fellow member of the Quidditch team. All of prefects were gone, either at home or off doing various other things, so she felt rather safe in the endeavour. Yet, she was surprised to look up from capturing the Chaser's rook to find Professor Snape striding in through the portrait. While that wasn't an altogether unusual sight, the fact that he was heading their direction set her on edge. And her unease only increased when he stopped in front of them, nodding to Montague.

Holly felt a trickle of forewarning. She had the distinct impression that she had just been set up, eyes meeting her companion's over the chessboard.

So much for Slytherin solidarity.

Mordecai at least had enough decency to look abashed. He met her gaze full on, cheeks flushing ever-so-faintly.

"Miss Potter," the Potions Master interrupted, instantly drawing her attention, "if you could come with me."

Holly's mind raced for a few seconds as she struggled to come up with an excuse, but she finally admitted defeat. There was no possible way she was getting out of this. It would be better for her in the long run to simply come quietly. As such, the third-year rose from her chair, giving Montague an ironic nod goodbye.

The Chaser exhaled heavily but nodded back, seeming regretful.

Their Head of House merely watched the exchange before ushering her out the entrance. He directed her to his office, walking beside her along the way but not saying anything more. The journey was short,

only a few corridors long, but to Holly, it felt like an eternity. Like she was walking to her doom.

And maybe she was.

His office door opened automatically. She somehow made it inside without dragging her feet.

“Have a seat, Miss Potter,” the man directed, dark eyes glittering in the candlelight.

He waited quietly as Holly did so, moving to stand in front of his desk and turning to face her. A wave of his hand closed the door, and the girl felt the unique magic of Locking spells and other wards springing into place. Professor Snape simply watched her for few heartbeats, silence stretching on.

She did everything in her power not to fidget, tilting her head to look back at him evenly. The Slytherin felt the faint flicker of approval from his mind but nothing else. He was a blank wall, there but impossible to discern.

Finally, Professor Snape spoke. “I do believe you know what this is about.”

Holly just nodded and closed her eyes with a sigh.

AN: Wow! An update! What else can I say? I’ve been sick. And midterms really suck. Plus, this is my last semester of undergrad, so everything is absolutely insane. Especially since I’m taking both Biochem and Japanese.

Further, I’m still open to suggestions for the gender and name of Blaise’s new sibling. If I happen across a name that I like better than the one I currently have, I will use it and change the baby’s sex if necessary.

And there’s a poll for this story on my author’s page. So go and vote. Also, please remember that I’ve already mentioned one definite

pairing, so no matter how many people vote to the contrary, it's still going to show up.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Thirty-Six: Solitary Serenade

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

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Holly just nodded and closed her eyes with a sigh.

"Do you have anything you wish to say, Miss Potter?" he inquired, voice holding a peculiar note.

"No, nothing I **wish** to say, sir," she replied without even opening her eyes.

The Potions master made an odd sound, half-way between a snort and a growl. "Perhaps I should rephrase then, Miss Potter. I will speak, and you will listen." He crossed his arms over his chest. "Several Prefects approached me with concerns about your home life, as did an Auror, Mr. Shacklebolt. I believe you know his niece Titania."

Holly's eyelids slid open, and she looked at him carefully. She fought the urge to shift in her seat, doing her utmost to formulate a response. However, she was apparently taking too long as her teacher continued.

"Auror Shacklebolt has **graciously** agreed to let me deal with this matter," he stated, tone suggesting just how ungracious the other

man had been. "If I do not, he most assuredly will. Something I cannot allow since it will inevitably enter the Ministry into the equation." He let her stew for moment. "Now, as to the matter at hand," the man went on smoothly, "your relatives care leaves much to be desired. It does not take a genius to see you're undernourished and underweight. Far too small for your age.

Holly scowled at that, but he simply ignored her.

"I am also aware of past complaints filed by your primary school, suspicions of neglect. Strangely, there never seemed to be any follow-up by the Muggle authorities. Perhaps Vernon Dursley's connections at work," Professor Snape mused. "That does not even cover the incident last August with that... **woman**. This all seems to suggest some form of abuse."

The girl opened her mouth but was cut off.

"Do not deny it, Miss Potter," he inserted tersely. Her Head of House regarded her for a moment, face shrewd and calculating. "By this stage it does not matter. It will be very easy to gather all the evidence I need, and regardless, **you will be removed from their care.**"

"Professor?" Holly nearly jumped to her feet. "How? Won't that involve the Ministry? I have to go back!"

"You do not," the Potions master insisted rather firmly. "And there are ways around the Ministry."

This time, Holly did rise. And now standing, her nose was sadly only chest-level. She craned her head to stare directly in his eyes, expression grim but defiant.

"But I have to return! What about the... erm..." She hesitated, not certain how much he knew about the blood protections. The very reason she had to stay with the Dursleys.

"I know about the blood wards, you foolish girl," Snape put in heatedly, looking for all the world like he wanted nothing more to grab her by the shoulders and shake sense into her. He settled for towering over her, even if the effect was somewhat unintentional. "Do you honestly

believe the headmaster will allow you to remain there? Did you not for a moment stop to think that the protections work properly or even at all given their behaviour towards you?"

Holly blinked. "Well... I... that is to say... it had possibly occurred to me." She shifted her weight helplessly, head dropping. "I know that I can't go back there, Professor, but I still need that protection."

He fought to keep his hands from inching forward. "The blood wards do not work at all, idiot child! They no longer exist!" he practically shouted but somehow restrained himself. "Whatever protection existed has now dissolved completely. It is gone."

"Then... but... what am I supposed to do now?" she asked, doing her best to not tremble. "I don't..." The girl swallowed thickly as she tried to fight the sudden lump in her throat.

She shook her head, mind a jumble of information that she was desperately trying to sort. Holly had only stayed with the Dursleys this long because of the blood wards. She needed it to protect her from Voldemort, when and not if he returned. But if what her professor said was true, then it hadn't meant anything. All this time she had put up with them had done her no good. It was worthless, completely worthless. It had all been for nothing. Nothing at all.

Maker, she was such an idiot. She should have realised sooner. Blaise had been right all along, but her best friend wasn't here at the moment. He couldn't help her through this. She was on her own, something Holly should be rather used to because of the Dursleys.

And how everything came back to them. To that family. But not her family. She was just a relative. An inconvenient and unwanted addition. A heavy and bothersome burden they couldn't wait to get rid of, to throw away with the rest of the rubbish.

Holly's hands shook as she clenched them into fists. There was a burning behind her eyes and in her throat. The girl felt the sudden urge to cry in that instant, to let her tears run free and never stop. And even years later she wasn't entirely sure why she didn't. Maybe she was simply too shell-shocked for it. Or perhaps it was what her Head of House did next.

He placed his hands on her shoulders and very gently lowered her back into her seat. A bottle was pressed to her lips, and she drank automatically, instantly fleeing a tingling calm spread throughout her body. Holly shook her head again to clear her thoughts, vaguely hearing him give a sigh and the scrap of another chair across the floor as he sat down in front of her. She blinked, only to see his dark eyes gazing back at her.

Snape spoke after a moment. "I have made arrangements. You will not be going back, Miss Potter. I can assure you of that." He said the last softly, normal sneer gone from his voice. "Mr. Zabini is most insistent that you simply stay with him for the foreseeable future. I am inclined to agree." He allowed that to sink in for a minute. "And that is why I approached Erendiria Zabini on this matter. She was most eager to foster you until you come of age."

Despite the Calming draught, Holly's eyebrows rose nearly even with her hairline. "Sir?"

He seemed mildly amused at her confusion but thankfully explained, "Fostering is a long and established tradition in our world, most especially for Muggleborns. It has fallen out of favour in the last century or so, given the increase in anti-Muggle sentiment. However, it is still practiced." The man smirked, obviously very pleased with himself.

"Fostering?" Holly repeated, synapses sluggish as she tried to wrap her brain around such a novel concept. "What does that actually mean?"

"A fostering is in many ways similar to an apprenticeship, though they are most assuredly not the same thing." He paused, taking in her still confused expression, and sighed again. "Think of it as a temporary adoption, one where a child goes to live with a Wizarding family for a space of time. This is how Muggleborns were once introduced to our world, how they learned its intricacies and customs."

She nodded slowly, sitting back in her seat. "I think that I understand, but won't people find this odd? I mean," Holly clarified, "we're doing this to keep the Ministry from becoming involved, but won't this make them suspicious?"

The Potions master considered her question with an appraising air. "In centuries past, it was a great honour to foster children; many still consider it to be. And given that it is common knowledge you live with Muggles, no one will think twice of a Wizarding family wanting to foster you." He added with a hint of what she thought was disdain, "You have actually received numerous offers in the past, though Dumbledore as your intermediary dealt with those."

She tilted her head at that but let it by without comment.

"Nevertheless," Professor Snape continued, "this is a perfect excuse. It effectively removes you from your relatives' custody without needing to involve the Ministry. It will be as though you are a member of the Zabini family. Legally and magically, you will be their responsibility until the fostering ends or you come of age. For all intents and purposes, they will be your guardians. They will have the final say in all that you do."

Holly swallowed hard.

A family, even a foster one, sounded wonderful. And the Zabinis were very fond of her already. Perhaps this could really work.

"And... and the Dursleys?" she asked with a false lightness. "What will happen to them?"

"I am aware that prosecution is out of the question at this present time, but we will most assuredly deal with your relatives at some point in the future." His dark eyes glittered malevolently in the faint light, a promise of retribution. "There are ways other than the Ministry to enact justice."

Holly wisely decided not to ask, instead casting her mind for another topic. "The fostering... when will it take effect? I assume that you still need the Dursleys' permission for it in the first place, but I don't think that will be a problem. They're eager to be rid of me."

"Quite likely," Snape responded, sneer evident on his lips. "Lady Zabini and I will be visiting your relatives later this month or possibly in May, after she has recovered from the birth of her child. You need not even be present when the agreement is signed."

“What about Professor Dumbledore?” Holly questioned as something occurred to her. “What are you going to tell him?”

“I do not need his permission to arrange a fostering for a student in my own House,” the man inserted with a faintly snide tone. “As for the true reason for your leaving... the headmaster already knows. I informed him myself just a few days ago. He also agreed to let me settle this matter.”

The girl’s heart thumped in her chest. “He already knows? And Re-Professor Lupin?”

“Lupin is undoubtedly aware of your situation as well.”

“I see,” she commented, inner calm fading as her insides squirmed.

Thankfully, the professor didn’t say anything else, and they sat in silence for a several minutes. The Potions master was unreadable behind his usual mask. Holly, on the other hand, was too deep in thought to care what she looked like.

“I believe that covers everything,” Professor Snape finally said as he rose to his feet. “I will meet with you again once the fostering is formally arranged, Miss Potter.”

Holly likewise stood, studying him as he moved to the door. Her eyes narrowed as she considered how smoothly he had dealt with the entire matter. It was all too easy for this to have been the first time.

“You’ve done this before, haven’t you?” the girl realised in burst of clarity. “Set up a fostering to get a student away from their family.

Snape stiffened. “Yes, I have,” he acknowledged softly, releasing the spells on his door. “And I will most likely do it again in the future.”

Holly didn’t know what to say to that, quietly standing for a few heartbeats before looking at him again. “Thank you, Professor,” she said, trying her best to convey her complete sincerity.

He inclined my head. "I could hardly allow one of my charges to come to harm. Further, Kingsley Shacklebolt would mount my head on his wall for anything less."

Holly somehow managed not to snigger. She instead nodded and quickly left, feeling his eyes on her as she walked out the door and down the hallway.

Easter came and went, the students returning only to be piled down with homework. The following week, Blaise became increasingly twitchy as his mother's due date came and went with no baby. He was eager to meet the newest member of his family, not that Holly could blame him. He had been at the birth of both of his sisters and would be there for this one as well.

As for Holly, she would be staying at school. With Sirius still on the loose, the Ministry would have a fit if she left the castle. Dumbledore and Snape would also not let her go for much the same reason. She honestly couldn't blame them, no matter how she desperately wanted to.

And so, the days went on. Still, the newest Zabini did not arrive.

So it both did and did not come as a surprise when Percy interrupted Charms class one afternoon to bring Blaise a note from the headmaster.

Mr. Zabini,

Could you please come to my office as soon as possible? Your mother has gone into labour. Miss Potter will undoubtedly escort you here.

A. Dumbledore

P.S.

I rather dislike Blood Pops.

Professor Flitwick quickly dismissed the two of them with a beaming grin, and they took off like a shot for the headmaster's office, Blaise dancing from side to side as the gargoyle guardian sedately moved out of the way. The pair was up the stairs in a flash, and Holly knocked on the door.

"Ah, good, Blaise, Holly," Dumbledore greeted with a smile less than a second later. "You certainly made good time. I sent Mr. Weasley barely ten minutes ago." He ushered the Slytherins inside his office and over to his fireplace. "I believe you know what to do. Just go directly home, my boy. Your father will meet you there." The old man threw a pinch of green powder into the flames, which instantly changed colour to match.

Blaise nodded but hesitated a moment as his eyes flickered to Holly. He didn't say anything, merely squeezing her hand as he stepped away. The boy moved into the emerald fire, and Holly watched him disappear with a lump in her throat. She briefly fantasised what it would have been like to go with him, and she wondered how Eren was doing

A sudden weight settled onto her shoulder, making her jump.

"It will be all right, my girl," Dumbledore assured her, accurately guessing the turn her thoughts had taken. "Dear Erendiria will be perfectly fine. I dare say that she knows what she is doing by this point." He softly nudged her to move from the fire.

Holly lingered, but Dumbledore's hand was warm on her shoulder, gently steering her away from the fireplace. He led her to a set of chairs by the far wall and next to a window, watching as she sat in one before lowering himself into the other. A flick of his wand conjured an elegant looking table in between them, and a house-elf appeared with a faint pop at the headmaster's left.

"Thank you, Peachy," the professor said as the elf set down a tea tray. "I do believe that is all for the moment."

"Yes, Headmaster Albus Dumbledore sir!" the elf bowed and vanished with another pop.

Dumbledore didn't speak as he busied himself with pouring the tea, giving Holly a plate of biscuits in the meantime. She idly noticed that they were her favourite.

"Sugar, Holly?" he questioned, sliding her cup to her a minute later. The old man watched as she quietly nibbled on a biscuit before giving a very soft sigh. "I apologise for not allowing you to go as well, Holly, though I suspect you know why."

She glanced at him. "Yes," Holly replied softly. "It wouldn't be safe." She took a sip from her cup, the tea hot and delicious, vaguely spicy. "Besides, the Ministry wouldn't have allowed it."

Dumbledore inclined his head. "No, I don't believe Minister Fudge would have let you leave castle grounds. He has become increasingly... **difficult** as of late, especially with Black still eluding the Aurors." He paused to peer at her over his half-moon spectacles. "I fear that he will take drastic action if something positive does not happen soon."

"Oh? And what would that be, sir?" Holly questioned, calm belying the unexpected twisting of her belly. She momentarily regretted eating the biscuits.

"Several possible outcomes." He set down his own cup. "Such as removing you from Hogwarts if Black is not captured soon. He did, after all, manage to make it into the castle proper."

Dumbledore looked at her steadily. Holly raised her gaze to meet his fully, shifting in her chair. She had never before noticed how very blue his eyes were, especially without the customary twinkle to obscure the colour.

"Even now," the headmaster continued with an odd tone of voice, "Minister Fudge and his undersecretary are most insistent that I allow the Dementors into the castle."

Holly shuddered at just the thought. Every bit of her hated the dreadful things, and despite the fact that her Patronus was steadily improving, there was no way she could fight off so many of them.

There had to be at least a hundred scattered about the school grounds.

Dumbledore studied her, face hardening. His eyes flashed. And Holly felt a tingle of magic race across her skin.

“Such a thing will never happen as long as I am headmaster. I assure you of that, my dear.” He reached across the table to pat her hand, feeling her tremble beneath his fingertips.

“I... yes, thank you, Professor Dumbledore,” Holly replied, the uneasiness draining out of her.

“It is the least I can do for you, Holly,” he commented as he pulled away.

She looked up at the odd turn of phrase, but he was busy pouring them more tea. Silence reigned between them for several moments before the headmaster finally spoke again.

“Professor Snape has informed me of your fostering, Holly. It is very fortunate that the Zabinis proposed such an arrangement and that you will be staying with them during the summer,” he said rather suddenly. “If you had not, I believe that the Minister would have either placed you in Auror custody or sent someone to stay with you at your relatives’ home. Perhaps even prevented you from returning to Hogwarts in September.” Something flickered across the old man’s face, but it was gone too quickly for Holly to identify. “All for you safety, of course.”

The girl felt her insides go cold, the implications sinking in. Had someone come to stay with her, they wouldn’t have been able to miss the Dursleys’ attitude towards her. From there, it would have been very easy to find out about their less than amicable behaviour in the past. On the other hand, being removed by the Ministry would have been just as bad, if not worse. She had no delusions that they would have let her have contact much less visits from her friends. She would have been all but locked in a cage. A gilded and elegantly decorated one but a cage nonetheless.

Her hands unconsciously clenched and unclenched. Holly picked up her tea cup just to stop them.

"Nevertheless, the offer by Erendiria is quite fortuitous," Dumbledore cut into her thoughts. "Your current guardians seemed to agree when I spoke with them."

The world abruptly froze.

"You... you went to speak with the Dursleys?" Holly asked breathlessly, eyes wide and uncertain. Her pupils were so dilated that the green was only a thin ring around the black.

"Yes, my dear girl," he responded very, very softly. "I felt it necessary with all that has been going on. They were quite eager for you to be fostered." The headmaster gazed at her with something all together too much like regret.

"You mean that they couldn't wait to be rid of me," the girl corrected, deciding not to beat around the bush. She put down her cup a bit more forcefully than she intended.

The old man sadly acknowledged, "It did seem that way." He hesitated but opened his mouth to speak again, only to be cut off as Holly abruptly rose.

"Excuse me, Headmaster," she apologised quickly, "but I really must be heading back to class. I have Transfiguration next, and I really don't want to miss it. Thank you for the tea."

Dumbledore stared at her for a heartbeat before inclining his head. "Ah, yes. Of course. Professor McGonagall does like to have her students present for every lesson."

He stood and escorted her to the door, a guiding hand on her shoulder. Her gaze momentarily flickered to the fireplace as they went by.

"I do wish you could have gone, Holly," Dumbledore repeated, following her eyes and squeezing his hand gently.

He walked her to his office door, opening it soundlessly. She turned to leave, but his hand was still on her shoulder.

"I truly am sorry, my dear girl," he said in a tired but sincere voice. "You will never know how very sorry I am."

With that, Dumbledore released her. But Holly hesitated, not at all certain what to say to that.

It was unclear which he meant, the Dursleys or keeping her at the castle.

Deep in her heart, Holly believed it was both.

Xavier Avogadro Zabini was born just before 8 p.m. on April 11th, much to the delight of his entire family. Blaise didn't return to the castle until after dinner the following day, bringing with him photos of his new brother. His friends and Housemates, mostly the girls, subsequently cooed all over them. Pansy was very adamant that Xavier was the cutest baby in existence and that he was certain to be handsome when he grew up. Milli rolled her eyes at that but didn't disagree. Daphne insisted that the youngest Zabini looked just like his brother, though how she could tell from the pictures was anyone's guess. Luna commented that he seemed healthy and therefore wasn't at risk of gay infestation, whatever that was. Holly just looked at the photos with something bordering on awe. Her chest ached at the thought that she had missed his birth, but she was slightly mollified by the fact that she would get to see him the entire summer.

Holly received a letter from Erendiria and Dante two weeks later, telling her that her fostering was now officially arranged, and the girl quickly tucked the note away after reading it. She had yet to tell her friends about her summer plans. Besides Blaise, only Sirius and Tom knew, and they had both given her very strange and searching looks when she had informed them. Undoubtedly, they could guess why she wasn't going back to the Dursleys but thankfully remained silently supportive on the matter.

The Quidditch final was the last weekend in April, Gryffindor versus Slytherin. But in the end, it was really not that much of a match at all. Slytherin had won all of their games by a considerable margin so far, and it came as no surprise when they defeated the Lions by two hundred points, assuring them the cup. Her good mood wasn't even dampened when Oliver Wood called foul on the fact that she had a Firebolt and about a dozen other things in an attempt to get her thrown from the game. Madam Hooch finally just told him off and shooed him away with a threat of a detention if he kept it up. Wood grouchyly stomped away, and the Weasley twins later told her that he was seen sporting a set of antlers in the Common Room, which they assuredly had nothing to do with at all. Nor was it their fault that Wood suddenly felt the urge to proclaim the Serpents' many virtues any time a Slytherin came near him.

The days stretched on. Everyone was gearing up for exams, which would be the next to last week in May. Even Fred and George were seen studying, something most people thought to be impossible. Professor Rosetta had already set them to reviewing Egyptian runes and few Celtic ones they had learned, promising they would all do fine if they simply studied. Vector had likewise started to review, all but directly stating that they would need to be able to work out the formulas of the first-year spells they had covered. The rest of the teachers slowly started to follow their lead, and the only ones who had yet to even address exams were Trelawney and Hagrid.

The first was too busy predicting Holly's death and seeing the bloody Grim at every turn to do much of anything else. The latter was preoccupied with Buckbeak, who was now set to die. Hagrid along with Ron and Hermione were researching for the appeal, but things did not look good, according to Neville. Holly felt a thread of remorse at hearing that and quietly promised to visit the man in the future to cheer him up.

Remus was forced to temporarily end her anti-Dementor lessons and their regular meetings for tea, not having the benefit of a Time Turner to help him with his grading. Holly was understandably saddened by this, especially since she only truly saw him during class now. He did make it a point to speak to her whenever he saw her in the hallways or during meals, but it simply wasn't the same. Holly rather thought

that he felt guilty for seemingly abandoning her, particularly when she remembered that he knew about her relatives.

With everyone starting to study for exams, Tom and Sirius were often left to their own devices. The Slytherins were gracious enough to owl order a few things for them, including several obscure books from a little shop in Knockturn that the Animagus insisted they needed. The two spent most of their time researching magical ways to track Pettigrew, as well as other things they both refused to talk about.

Holly visited Sirius every day, using the Time Turner, but he was left by himself most of the time. She could only imagine what he did while they were gone. Holly personally thought the man was becoming a rather obsessed with finding the rat, not that she could really blame him. Her godfather seemed to be losing weight, his clothes fitting more loosely on him than they had before. He was even having nightmares, though he refused to talk about them to anyone. Holly wasn't certain what to do for him, and neither did any of the others. They really needed to get Remus to help, but with everything that was going on, Holly just didn't have the time to explain it all to him.

As for Tom, Holly was sorry that she hadn't been spending as much time with him the last several months. She was mostly limited to writing to him while in History or Divination, a dictaquill taking notes for her. He didn't blame her, however, content with his books and spending time with the others. Luna in particular had taken to carrying his diary around for extended periods of time. Holly suspected it was because no one save the teachers ever talked to her in class.

The Saturday before exams began Holly took a break from studying to spend the day with Tom and to explore Slytherin's passageways. It was something they had been meaning to do for quite a while; they just hadn't found the chance to do it earlier. Sirius was holed up in his room, actually sleeping for once. Holly knew better than to interpret such a precious opportunity, so she and Tom went off on their own.

All morning they traipsed through the passages, mapping as they went. They happened across one odd corridor in particular, serpents carved along the walls in an intricate pattern. To their unending surprise, they followed the tunnel all the way to the end, only to come

out of a side entrance in the Chamber of Secrets. The exit was cleverly hidden behind a column, certainly concealed by magic unless one already knew what to look for. Tom was very impressed, obviously having no idea that it was even there, despite how he had explored the area.

Exams started that Monday, much to the dismay of everyone. Holly breezed through them all. Sure enough, Vector had them break down the numbers and formulas for several spells, while Rosetta surprised them all by giving what amounted to a runic crossword puzzle. Remus' exam was just as interesting, an obstacle course complete with Boggart at the very end. Holly had no problems with it, using her semi-corporal Patronus to send the creature running. According to Fred and George, however, Hermione had difficulty with that part, needing to go to the Hospital Wing for a Calming draught. She had actually seen Professor McGonagall, who had summarily told her she had failed everything.

The rest of her exams flew by, and Holly only had vague recollections of Snape nodding his approval at her potion and Flitwick's large smile. Friday came with her last two tests, Transfiguration in the morning followed by Divination straight after lunch.

She sat down to breakfast, catching a glimpse of several adults walking by the open door to the Entrance Hall. Yet, she was distracted from that when Hedwig swooped down and delivered a note from Hagrid. Holly didn't even have a chance to look at it before Milli was pulling her to her feet, insisting that they needed to head to Transfiguration. Holly simply tucked the message into her bag.

Less than an hour later, she finished both the written and practical portions of her Transfiguration exam with plenty of time to spare, and she pulled a book from her bag, knowing that McGonagall would never dismiss anyone early from a class. Holly didn't even bother to scan over her notes for Divination, honestly not caring. But about three pages into her book, Holly suddenly remembered her message from Hagrid. She idly cast a glance at her tablemate as she stooped to fetch it. But Draco was preoccupied with making an origami dragon, probably to pass a note to Blaise, who McGonagall had forced to sit by himself. Holly just shrugged and slipped the letter out of her bag.

She scanned it, learning that Buckbeak's appeal was that very morning. Despite Hagrid's insistence that she not come, the Slytherin soon decided to visit after exams were over. It was the least she could do for him.

Her Divination exam was an absolute joke. Holly was the last to go, the corridor below the trapdoor emptying until she was the only one left. She waved her friends on, though Theo was reluctant. After waiting for what seemed like an eternity, Trelawney finally called her up. Holly didn't even bother to bluff her way through, knowing that the woman wouldn't believe her unless she said something tragic. She settled for claiming that Buckbeak would be sentenced to die but would miraculously escape, possibly mauling several people on his way out. Trelawney lapped it up eagerly, giving her top marks.

Holly had to fight the urge to snicker as she stood and grabbed her bag. She was half-way to the door when she felt a bizarre flash of foreboding. And then, there was a very strange noise behind her, not at all sounding like Trelawney. The Slytherin whirled around, only to freeze at what she saw.

Trelawney was still at the examination table, head lolling. Her eyes were open, but Holly couldn't see her irises or pupils at all, only white. The woman then spoke, voice deep and harsh.

"The Dark Lord lies alone and friendless, abandoned by his followers. His servant has been chained these twelve years. Tonight, before midnight... the servant will break free and set out to rejoin his master. The Dark Lord will rise again with his servant's aid, greater and more terrible than ever he was. Tonight... before midnight... the servant... will set out... to rejoin... his master."

Holly felt all of the air rush out of her, mouth gaping open. Trelawney started and sat up, acting for all the world like she had just woke from a nap. Holly stared at her before hastily backing away and leaving through the trapdoor. She rushed down the corridor and took a shortcut the twins had once shown her, exiting near the Defence room. She then promptly entered another passageway, one

connected to Slytherin's network. The girl raced back to her godfather's room, bursting inside without even knocking.

"Sirius! Sirius, you have to hear this! You'll never be--" She abruptly quieted as she looked around.

Blaise and Draco were there, in the middle of what looked to be a heated discussion as Sirius gathered several things from around his room, potions vials and several odd objects. Holly absentmindedly wondered where the others were before remembering that Luna was probably still in her Herbology exam. Tom was most likely with her, tucked away in her bag.

"Sirius, what's going on?" the girl questioned as she walked up to him.

He turned to gaze at her, eyes all but glowing. "It's better to show you, Hols. Just look at this!"

The man had a peculiar expression as he pushed a piece of parchment at her. Holly instantly recognised it as the Marauder's Map. But her attention was snapped away from that thought as Sirius tapped a place on the map with his forefinger, Hagrid's Hut. A single person was in the cabin, but it wasn't Hagrid. And Holly squinted at the name before suddenly gasping.

Peter Pettigrew.

AN: Yes, I gave Blaise's little brother a very bizarre name, but then, everyone in his family has an odd one. I named him after both a famous professor and a scientist to go with the intellectual theme of Blaise and Dante.

Also, I am finally finished with college! Hooray! I now just have to finish grad school. Not-so-hooray! And I've already started on the next chapter. I am trying to finish it before my sister and I leave for our week in the Bahamas at in the middle of May.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Cave Canem

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Cave Canem

"So what's the plan," Draco asked as they all gathered around.

The Animagus shook his head, picking up the Invisibility Cloak. "I'm going, and you three are staying."

"You and what wand?" Holly put in with a distinct smirk.

Sirius reached for his holster, "What do--" His fingers found nothing but air. Silvery blue eyes flickered to his goddaughter, shining with something rather like approval. "Perhaps I should rephrase that."

"Oh, do tell?" Blaise said, sniggering lightly.

"Holly and I will go on along, while you two wait here," the man suggested, trying his best to sound authoritative.

Draco fingered his own wand. "Try, try again."

"Er... all of us will be going, and I best not argue," Sirius corrected dejectedly.

"As Luna would say," Blaise put in with a very satisfied air, "we have a winner."

"That rather does sound like something I'd say," Luna commented as she breezed in through the door. She glanced around the room, taking in the scene. "Oh, this does indeed look like fun. Are we going on a treasure hunt?"

Sirius gave a venomous grin. "More like taking out the trash. We found Pettigrew."

Luna's entire demeanour shifted. "Where?" she asked as Tom phased out of his diary into the room proper.

"Hagrid's hut," Holly replied, and she showed the two newcomers the map. "We were just planning what to do."

"And no, before you ask. We can't all go," Sirius inserted quickly. "I mean, we simply won't all fit under the cloak, and that's the only way

we'll manage to get on and off the grounds with all the professors about and patrolling."

Luna just smiled and hummed to herself. "I expect that Tom and I will stay here then. If you're not back in an hour, I'll fetch Professor Lupin, shall I?"

It was Holly who answered, "Please do. But only after an hour. And only Remus. You might as well tell the others, too. Milli go berserk when she finds out we went off without telling her."

Blaise didn't seem too happy with the suggestion but wisely remained silent.

"Just Lupin?" Tom questioned, crossing his arms over his chest. "Are you certain you don't want a back-up?"

"What about Severus? What?" Draco demanded when they all turned to look at him. "What if Lupin's not there when you go to find him? We'll undoubtedly need someone on the faculty to help us. Unless you lot want to run off to find Dumbledore, but he'd probably be a hard sell."

The Animagus rolled his eyes. "That's all well and good, but Snape wouldn't work. Aside from the fact that he utterly loathes me, there is the little problem of him being a Death Eater. The Ministry would have a field day. One follower of Voldemort trying to telling them the truth about another follower." He breathed out heavily, nostrils flaring.

"Well, there is that," the boy responded with a wounded look. "There's no need to get shirty about it. I was only trying to help." He gave an elegant shrug.

"We'll just go for Remus." Holly added with a sigh, "He knows both Sirius and Pettigrew and would give us the benefit of the doubt when we tried to explain."

Tom inclined his head. "Fine. So what exactly do you plan to do? Just go to Hagrid's and summon the rat? Make it sound like you found him and are giving him back to Weasley?"

Sirius seemed to think about it. "Basically. Let's just keep this simple." He nodded to himself. "Plus, I'll be a cat. It's not like he'll know it's me."

"The rest of us will just go up and have tea with him," Holly responded. "I mean, we've done it before. He won't notice anything strange."

"How are you going to explain this sudden visit to Hagrid?" Tom asked, rubbing his chin with one hand. "Especially with all that's been happening? The Dementors and all. Pettigrew is certain to notice that something odd is going on and bolt. And Draco's going to be with you. He's not exactly Hagrid's favourite person."

Everyone was stumped for a moment, trying to come up with an excuse. Sirius shifted from foot to foot with a sense of anxiety, not that anyone could blame him.

"Buckbeak," Holly put in suddenly, green eyes gleaming. "His execution is today. It's perfect."

"What? No! Dammit." Draco made a face. "He's not exactly going to want to see me then. I suppose, I'll just stay underneath the cloak, while the others go in."

Sirius prodded them, "So it's decided then? We need to get going. Pettigrew won't be there forever."

There was a consensus of agreement.

"You'll be careful, won't you?" Luna twisted her skirt in her hand. "The mumbas have been rather uppity lately, and I fear they might get you if you don't watch out."

"We will, Luna, Tom," Holly replied sincerely as they headed out the door.

The Ravenclaw watched silently as her friends left. She sighed as they closed the door behind them, face completely unreadable as she tucked her feet beneath her and sat on the floor. One minute faded into the next without any comment.

Finally, Tom walked over to her. "We're not actually going to stay here." It was a statement and not a question.

"Of course not. We'll inevitably have to rescue them, and I don't suspect Professor Lupin will be too useful in that."

Tom snorted. "What with it being the full moon and all." He paused to consider. "We'll give them their hour. Then, it's on to Lupin followed by Snape. Or perhaps we'll just send him an anonymous letter." He considered the possibilities. "Despite what the mutt says, he's still the best choice. Dumbledore will believe him before anyone else."

Luna nodded sagely as she climbed to her feet. "Exactly."

It was easy enough to get out of the castle, if a bit crowded underneath the cloak. As tall as Blaise and Draco were getting, they'd soon only be able to fit two people, but it would do for now. Holly carried Snuffles in her arms as they went, passing by Fudge and a few of his lackeys and managing to exit through the Entrance Hall doors just as Professor Rosetta entered. The sun was in the process of setting as they raced across the grounds and arrived at Hagrid's without seeing anyone else. However, there, they ran into problems.

Hagrid was not alone in his hut.

"It's the Gryffindors," Holly muttered heatedly. She turned to her friends.

Sirius stiffened in her arms.

"What?" both Blaise and Draco asked.

Holly leaned in. "They're here. Inside! Ron, Hermione, and Neville. And I think that they have Scabbers."

"What!" Blaise and Draco said together again, sounding like a broken record. They exchanged a look over her head.

"What are we going to do?" the brunet questioned on his own.

“We can’t just bust in there,” the other boy inserted. “And there is no way they’re just going to let us walk off the rat.” He shifted very slightly.

Holly exhaled in a rush. “Just think for a minute. We can come up with something. It’ll be fine, Sirius,” she added to her godfather.

He was tense underneath her fingertips, stiff and quivering. His fur was standing on end. Almost like he had stuck his finger in a Muggle electrical outlet or been struck by a Static spell. Holly did her best to calm him, hand brushing over his little kitten body. But it didn’t seem to be working.

Blaise unexpectedly said, “We can just stick with the plan. Draco will stay here, while we go in. Then, we’ll grab Pettigrew when they leave. It can’t be too much longer. Fudge will be here any moment.”

“I could distract them somehow,” Draco added in. “I’ll have the cloak, after all.”

Holly glanced at him. “Like how?”

He seemed stumped. “I could...”

The boy glanced around, searching for something of use. His eyes landed on Buckbeak, who was tethered on the far side of the cabin. A sudden idea formed in his mind, one that he both liked and hated.

Draco made a face. “I could set the bloody hippogriff loose. That’ll definitely distract them.”

Holly snorted. “Just loosen the knot a bit; I’ll do the rest.” She absentmindedly scratched behind Snuffles’ ears. “That way he’ll still be here when Fudge and his minions arrive. And my, won’t they be surprised when Buckbeak gets away?”

With that, Holly and Blaise threw off the cloak and approached the hut, Sirius still firmly in her arms. They were let in seconds after knocking, only to have Hagrid subsequently throw himself on them. The two Slytherins managed to pry him off with Neville’s help. And

afterwards, they stood awkwardly casting glances at the others as Hagrid tried to go about making tea.

They tried to strike up a conversation, but it was difficult. Holly could both feel and see Pettigrew held firmly in Ron's hands. He was squeakily struggling to break free, much to the redhead's chagrin. It took every ounce of self-control she possessed not to stun him on the spot, which was the last thing they needed to do with so many witnesses. But just as her restraint withered to the breaking point, Hagrid suddenly ushered them out, certain that Fudge would arrive soon. The enormous man all but shoved them out the backdoor, and something unfortunate happened in that moment.

Ron stumbled and tried to catch his balance.

And Pettigrew, the opportunist that he was, used the opportunity to escape, wiggling out from between his fingers. Sirius immediately jumped from her arms and gave chase. Ron let out a shout and followed after. The other two Gryffindors hesitated for a fraction of a second, stopping to look at each other in confusion. Finally, Neville darted off in the same direction, Hermione on his heels. Holly hedged on following. It was too dark now to properly see where they'd all gone.

Instead, the girl tugged Blaise along behind her, immediately zeroing in on Draco's position. The two of them ducked beneath the cloak, and the girl unfolded the Marauder's Map; it was faster than trying to find them with her Mind Magic. She scanned over it as she searched for both Sirius and Pettigrew. Holly figured that one had to be pretty close to the other.

"They're headed towards Hogsmeade." Draco pointed towards an area of the map.

"That leads to the Shrieking Shack," Holly corrected with a distinct frown. "Sirius told me that was where Remus used to transform. The entrance is just under the Whomping Willow."

"Well, it looks like Weasley is right there with them," Draco replied, using his wand to light up the map. The boy watched as Ron followed

the two Animagi to the edge and disappeared. "And the rest of the Gryffindors are just behind."

Blaise shook his head. "We have to go, too. No telling how they'd react if either Pettigrew or Sirius transform. And Sirius will need backup. Pettigrew was a Death Eater, after all."

Holly folded the map with a flick of her wand, and they hurried to the Whomping Willow. The tree was already swaying, meaning that Neville and Hermione had probably come and gone. Still, it was easy enough to find a stick on the ground and press the knot at the base. The willow instantly stopped thrashing, and the three Slytherins quickly went inside.

The tunnel was earthen, low and slopping. Blaise's hair brushed the ceiling as they slowly crept forward, not entirely certain what they would find at the end. Holly could sense the others in the distance, but it was too chaotic to get a clear reading of any of them. She only knew that they were alive and in relatively good condition.

The Slytherins exited the tunnel into a room with faded and peeling wallpaper. What furniture was present was smashed to pieces, complete with jagged claw marks and what appeared to be bite impressions. Holly felt people just overhead, in the master bedroom, and she directed her friends to go up the creaking stairs. They moved as quietly as they could, and she did her best to send a mental warning to Sirius. But his mind was closed off and distant, obviously focused on something else.

Wands at the ready, they approached. Holly opened the door with a mental nudge. And she entered the room, the other two just behind her.

Ron was on the bed, panting and clutching his bleeding leg with one hand. Scabbers was held firmly in the other. Hermione knelt next to him, hair absolutely wild and clothing in disarray. Neville stood in front, facing the doorway. He seemed to be in the best condition out of all of them with only a few scraps.

"Behind you," Neville shouted as he spotted them. "It's a trap."

Hermione tearfully added, "He's an Animagus."

The three Slytherins whirled around. The door slowly swung shut, a man standing where it had just been. He was handsome, black hair hanging past his shoulders. His blue-grey eyes gleamed in the dim light, alive and flashing. And he had a wand in each hand, undoubtedly with two others in the pocket of his robe.

Holly studied him for a heartbeat. "Hello, Sirius." She lowered her own wand, her friends following suit.

The Gryffindors gaped, Ron's mouth dropping open.

Sirius beamed. "Holly, Blaise, Draco, how kind of you to drop in. We were just getting to the good part."

"But... you know him?" Hermione asked weakly.

Holly glanced at her. "We've met. And I believe he has something very interesting to show us."

"Don't listen to him," the redhead bit out painfully. "He's completely round the twist. Scabbers isn't human." He clutched his pet closer to his chest as Sirius moved to look at him.

"You shouldn't move your leg so much," the man stated, eyeing the large gash. "You'll only make it bleed worse. I can heal it for you though." He stepped closer.

The boy scooted back on his elbows. "Stay away from me. And Scabbers. He's just a rat."

"But that isn't a rat, Ron," Holly informed him, tone even but firm. "That's Peter Pettigrew."

"Impossible. Ridiculous," Hermione interrupted. "Black must have gotten to you."

Ron was all too quick to agree. "You've gone mad. The lot of you. Black's gone and Confounded you. He's working for You-Know-Who. He'll kill us all if we trust him."

"I don't think they've been spelled," Neville broke in calmly, the sole voice of reason. His Housemates stared at him, but he merely shrugged. "Look at them. Do they seem Confounded? Or crazy?" His gaze flickered from one Slytherin to the next. "I think that we should hear them out." He gave his friends a fierce look before nodding at the Slytherins. "Go on, Holly."

But Draco broke in before she could say anything. "Give them their wands back, Sirius. It's the only way they'll listen."

Sirius gazed at the boy for a moment, eyes flickering to his goddaughter. At her nod, he tossed all the wands back.

"There. Happy?" Blaise inquired rhetorically. "Will you listen now?"

Obviously, the Gryffindors didn't know what to think. They exchanged a bewildered glance but remained silent. Holly took that as her cue.

"Pettigrew is an Animagus. They're both Animagi," she stated loudly, overriding what Hermione was about to say. "Both unregistered. They learned here at school, along with my dad."

"But why?" the other girl asked. "Why would they do that? It doesn't make any sense."

"For a friend." When they looked at her with disbelief, Holly sniffed and added, "He was a werewolf, and they could only keep him company as animal. But I won't tell you who it is. Don't bother asking." She shot them a glare when Hermione narrowed her eyes. There was a tingle at the back of her mind, but her attention was quickly directed away from it.

Ron shook his head. "And you expect us to believe all this? Black could've lied to you."

"That sounds rather farfetched," Hermione stated with equal disbelief. "Can you prove any of it?"

"Well," Blaise cut in, "it's easy enough to check. I just happen to know a Revealing spell." He avoided mentioning that Sirius had taught it to him. "Watch. It turns red in the presence of humans."

He slowly flicked his wand under the Gryffindors watchful eyes and cast the spell on Holly. A cloud of reddish smoke surrounded her for a moment before disappearing.

Blaise gestured. "See. It's red. And if Scabbers is really an Animagus. It'll turn red, too."

As he moved toward Ron, Holly felt a tickle at the back of her mind. She tilted her head in concentration. Another person was approaching, at the top of the stairs, but it wasn't Remus. Instead, it was--

The door flung open, Professor Snape outlined by the frame. Instantly, everyone lost their wands, even Sirius. Holly, however, managed to pull hers back telekinetically, slipping it into her robes without anyone noticing. In the meantime, Snape pocketed the others.

"Professor, what are you doing here?" Draco asked after a moment of stunned silence.

The Potions master stepped further into the room. "I received an anonymous letter. It told me where I could find a particular escaped criminal, along with several of my Slytherins." His dark gaze went from one person to the next and settled on Sirius, taking in his rather normal appearance. "And what do we have here? The infamous Sirius Black? Are you so inhuman now that Azkaban didn't even have an effect?"

The other man stiffened, but before he could say anything, Holly stepped in front of him.

"Please, sir. It's not what you think," she said softly. Green eyes looked up at him imploringly

His hands twitched. "Miss Potter, have you lost what precious little sense you have?" the Potions master questioned heatedly, fingers tightening on his wand. "Step away from him. He's dangerous. An escapee from Azkaban. One out for your precious head!"

Holly took a step forward, still trying to reason with her Head of House. However, he used the opportunity to quickly lunged forward

and grab her robe. He jerked her away and to the side of him, his wand firmly fixed on Sirius the entire time. The Animagus inched towards them, but Professor Snape swished his wand dangerously in the other man's direction.

"Give me a reason, Black," the teacher said in his most venomous tone, the tip of his wand glowing. "Give me a reason, and I swear I will. You will not touch her again." He gestured for Sirius to move to the far wall and away from the students.

The Animagus grudgingly did so. "This isn't what you think, Snape. I wasn't going to hurt them."

"I highly doubt that," the Potions master replied nastily, turning so that he could watch everyone in the room. "I don't know what spell you used on them, but believe me, Black, I won't fall for it so easily."

Draco practically begged, shifting forward, "Professor, please just give us a chance to explain."

Snape's eyes went to him. "You can explain later, Mr. Malfoy. There will be plenty of time for that after we get back to the castle."

The man moved then. He might have been going to simply tie Sirius up. Or perhaps something more sinister. They'd never know, for as his attention momentarily focused on Draco, Holly moved. She carefully slipped her wand free and cast the first spell that entered her mind. The Stunner hit Snape in the side. He never even saw it coming, landing in an unceremonious heap on the floor.

"You just cursed Severus," Draco stated obviously as Sirius bent to retrieve everyone's wands.

"I had to." Holly sighed weakly. "He's going to be so furious." She finally lowered her arm and knelt to check on her teacher.

"Maybe he'll blame them and not you." Blaise inclined his head to the Gryffindors, who were all too stunned by what had just happened to notice.

"I dare say he might," another voice interrupted, male and quite clearly amused.

They whirled around to see yet another professor.

Remus Lupin.

"Hello, everyone," he greeted pleasantly, like he hadn't just walked in on a colleague being curse behind his back. "I just heard a most fantastic story from Miss Lovegood. She seemed to believe that I can find Peter Pettigrew here, alive and well." His eyes travelled to Sirius and froze, staring for several very long minutes.

"And you believed her?" Ron put in incredulously.

Draco sniffed. "Look, Weasley. You can't possibly believe that all of us are Confounded. Let the man handle it. He'll do it better than any of us could."

Ron just gawked at him. For once, he didn't argue. Even Hermione remained quiet, face oddly blank as she watched Lupin with a peculiar expression, biting her lip. The man didn't seem to notice. He had yet to shift his attention from Sirius. And Sirius just stared back.

"Er... Professor?" Neville prompted after a minute.

Remus started. "Ah... yes. Yes, of course." He visibly shook himself. "Where is he, Sirius?"

The other man swallowed thickly and glanced away. "On the bed. With the boy."

Remus finally looked at Ron and moved towards him. He reached out one hand to shut the door as he went by, but someone breezed inside just then.

"Am I late? Oh, are we having a party?" Luna questioned cheerfully. "I do believe I'm overdressed," she added, seeing that her companions were in various states of disarray. "And I am sorry, Professor Lupin, but I couldn't just stay behind while my friends were in trouble."

“What is with you people?” Neville asked as he gaped at her.

Holly rubbed a hand over her face as Luna sidled up to her. “I suppose that our hour was up.”

Luna studied her watch. “It is now.”

The older girl sighed and simply watched as Remus talked to Ron.

“Could I see your rat please?” the professor gave him a winning smile.

He took the squealing and struggling rat into his own hand. Remus brought him to the centre of the room, and both he and Sirius raised their wands. There was a flash of light, and then, where there had once been a rat... was now a man. A short and balding and altogether unpleasant looking man. What was left of his colourless hair stuck straight on end, and he was wringing his pudgy hands nervously.

“It **is** true then,” Remus said in a hollow and shocked voice. “It’s all true. Everything Luna told me.” He looked at his old friend again. “I’m so sorry, Sirius. So very sorry. How could I have ever doubted you? How could I have ever believed **him**?” His face hardened as his eyes went back to Pettigrew.

“Re-Remus... Sir-Sirius.” The little man attempted to smile at them.

“Well, hello, Peter. Long time, no see,” Remus replied, tone pleasant but demeanour deadly. “It’s been what? Over a decade since you betrayed Lily and James to their deaths.”

The traitor squeaked. “I-I... would... never--”

“Oh, give it up,” Sirius cut in fiercely, teeth gritting together. “We all know it was you. Why else would you still be alive and in hiding? You knew that Voldemort’s followers would be after you, would think that you’d tricked them. And you couldn’t go to Dumbledore. He’d realise the truth about everything once he saw you.”

Pettigrew flinched at the name of his master. “No... I’m... innocent...” he defended, watery eyes red rimmed.

Draco inserted in a haughty voice, "You had years to find Dumbledore if you were innocent. And obviously, he could've protected you. Not even the Dark Lord could ever defeat him."

"But you didn't," Blaise continued with a razor sharp smile. "You couldn't."

Luna watched as Pettigrew looked everywhere but at Holly. "And even now, you can't look her in the eyes," she commented softly. "The true mark of a guilty man. Everyone knows you did it, even them." The girl gestured to the Gryffindors.

They were too shocked to say much of anything. Ron seemed deeply disturbed by Scabbers' true identity, clearly remembering that the rat had slept in his bed. Hermione was trembling noticeably, hand held over her mouth. Neville just glared at Pettigrew, lips in a thin line.

The traitor wrung his hands again. "But... no... Lily and James."

You were passing information for over a year before they died. Don't bring them into this," Remus replied, pleasant face taking on a dangerous cast. "They trusted you. Invited you into their home. Let you spend time with Holly. And you all but killed them."

Pettigrew didn't answer. He turned away, shaking as he tried to breathe.

"Nothing else to say for yourself, Peter?" Sirius inquired after a few minutes, raising his wand. "You should have died, you know. Died instead of betraying your friends. As we would have done for you." He lifted his chin resolutely. "Well, I guess this is goodbye then."

Pettigrew screeched in terror. He was on the verge of wetting himself as the tip of Sirius' wand flared.

"Goodbye, Peter," Draco put in cheerfully, giving a jaunty wave.

The others just watched in a sick sort of fascination as Sirius gave a dead little smile.

The rat dove for Remus, grovelling on his knees. But the werewolf kicked him away. Pettigrew then moved to Neville, only to jerk back as the boy lifted his own wand. One by one, the traitor beseeched each of them. Until finally, he went to Holly. She stared at him for a moment before calling off her godfather.

“Don’t get any ideas, rat. I am not saving you,” Holly replied to Pettigrew’s squeak of gratitude, eyes glowing the colour of the Killing curse. “It’s just that your dead body won’t be proof enough for Fudge.” Her gaze flickered to Sirius, and she gave a forceful nod. “We’ll take him to the headmaster. He’ll know what to do.”

Her godfather inclined his head and stepped back to stand near the Gryffindors. His wand was still fixed on Pettigrew, nevertheless.

“But there’s one thing I don’t understand,” Hermione finally said several seconds later.

Ron goggled at her. “One thing?”

“How did you know?” She made a gesture towards Pettigrew. “Mr. Black, how did you know that Scabbers was Pettigrew out of millions of rats? And how did you ever get out of Azkaban, for that matter? It’s supposed to be impossible.”

Sirius blinked at being addressed like this. “That is a very long story. I’ll be sure to tell it to you one day.” His attention went to Ron then, and before the redhead could even protest, Sirius started to examine his injured leg.

His goddaughter watched them curiously but remained silent.

“The boy got hit by the willow on his way in,” the Animagus explained with a shrug. “He wouldn’t let me heal it earlier.” He waved his wand and the long gash instantly closed, leaving only a red line that was rapidly fading to pink. “That should do it, but you’ll probably still need to go to the nurse, just in case. You’ve lost some blood.”

In the meantime, Remus tied up Pettigrew with a flick of his wand and set some kind of spell to keep him from transforming. Blaise walked over to his Head of House, gently levitating the man. It took several

minutes for everyone to get situated, and Sirius and Remus went to exit. They arrived at the door at the same time, bumping into each other.

“Sirius,” the professor breathed.

“Remus.”

There was a distinct cough behind them.

“Er...” Remus responded articulately. “Later... We’ll talk later.”

With that, their very odd party left the master bedroom and traversed the stairs. Remus led them through the tunnel, his wand still trained on Pettigrew, who was just beside him. Ron and Neville were right behind, their wands also out. Next was Blaise, levitating Professor Snape, followed by Hermione and then Draco and Luna. Holly and Sirius brought up the rear.

They left the tunnel and started across the ground. Night had fallen, but the entire sky was overcast. Not a star or the moon in sight.

But then, a cloud moved, moonlight peeking through.

Remus froze. Neville nearly ran into him but managed to stop in the nick of time. Sirius jogged forward to see what was going on. However, he came up short as his friend hunched over and began to shake.

“Run,” Sirius whispered, eyes impossibly wide. “Run now.”

He leapt at Remus, transforming into a dog mid-air. Their professor snarled, entire body lengthening. A snout formed where there had once been a mouth and nose. Fur burst from his skin, clothes ripping as he grew in size. He let loose a terrifying howl.

Remus was turning into a wolf.

“He must not have taken the potion today,” Draco realised in horror. “Severus was too busy to give it to him.” He started to back away, taking Luna with him.

Blaise gave a strangled sound, wand held in suddenly limp fingers. The spell holding Professor Snape upright abruptly ended, and it was only through Holly's quick thinking that he didn't crash to the ground. She revived him with a wave, but while her attention was focused elsewhere, Pettigrew made his move.

He lunged at his redheaded escort, grabbing his wand. There was a burst of light as he both freed himself from his restraints and blasted Ron and Neville off their feet. The two boys hit the ground hard, Ron's head connecting and making him see stars. Hermione hurried over to them, helping Neville pull her other friend to his feet, but he swayed dangerously.

"Oh, Merlin. We have to go, Ron," Hermione begged, pulling at him with tears in her eyes. "He's the werewolf. The one they learned to be Animagi for."

Meanwhile, Pettigrew cast another spell on himself. He then transformed and disappeared into the night. No one even saw which direction he'd gone.

And even as that was happening, Sirius and the werewolf were just metres away, locked in a deadly battle. The wolf was massive, easily the size of Sirius in dog-form. Perhaps even larger. The Animagus' blood dripped from his canines as he ripped chunks of fur and flesh free. Sirius, in turn, snapped back. He body checked the wolf, keeping him from the others.

They could only watch with horror.

"Move!" Holly all but yelled. "Move now!" She gave the redhead a shove to get him going and turned to her Head of House. "Come on, Professor. We have to get out of here." She helped the dazed man stand straight and dragged him along. Her head swivelled around then, feeling fear coming off her bonded in waves. "Blaise. Blaise, we have to get out of here."

However, Blaise didn't move. He just stood there, staring in abject terror. The boy watched as the wolf tore into Sirius with a sickened sort of interest. It was like seeing some kind of catastrophe. He just couldn't look away, revulsion and fear keeping him rooted to the spot.

"Come on, Zabini. Move," Draco stopped to shout at him, but his friend didn't even hear him. "Bloody hell. *Accio Blaise Zabini.*" The blond boy groaned as Blaise smacked into him but somehow stayed on his feet. "Move it." He and Luna all but carried the brunet away.

Regardless, they weren't fast enough. The wolf viciously threw Sirius from him and darted after, seeing its prey escaping. It caught up easily and instantly zeroed in on Blaise. The boy made a noise in his throat, like he wanted to scream but lacked the ability. He stepped back automatically as the wolf prepared to pounce.

There was a shrill call then, more like a trumpeting before the charge. Suddenly, a greyish blur ploughed straight into the wolf, rolling around in a ball of fur and feathers, talons and teeth. Seconds later, the wolf was tossed back as Sirius joined the fray, and it struggled to its quivering paws before running off into the woods.

The Animagus transformed back to a human and dropped to his knees. He was bleeding fiercely from several places, including a not so shallow cut on his neck. As for their saviour, Buckbeak trotted over to them. Or more specifically, over to Draco. The hippogriff gave a pleased sound and nuzzled the blond's neck. He just stood there in shock, too confused to notice Blaise lose what was left of his dinner in the nearby bushes. Holly did her best to comfort him, rubbing his back as she looked on helplessly.

Professor Snape grabbed his aching head, moaning faintly as he straightened. He half-staggered over to Sirius, but the Animagus was in no condition to defend himself. The Potions master reached into his robes, and Sirius stiffened from his spot on the ground, knowing there was little he could do. His own wand had been lost in the fight. However, the other man simply pulled out a purplish potion.

"Drink this." Snape practically shoved the bottle in Sirius' face, and at his mutinous expression, the professor growled. "Maker, Black! I'm not going to poison you after you saved us from a bloody werewolf. And I highly doubt that I'd survive both a four-way duel and a vengeful hippogriff if I dare try anything."

Sirius blinked and reluctantly drank his potion. "Thanks," he murmured as his injuries sealed shut. He unsteadily climbed to his feet, helped by Luna as Snape marched off to check on his students.

Nearby, the three Gryffindors were trying to get their bearings. Ron moaned, clutching his pained head, blood on his fingertips. Hermione was doing her best to calm herself; she had one hand firmly over her heart, fingers twisted into the fabric of her shirt. Neville took a deep breath beside her. He had one hand on the redhead's shoulder to keep him stable.

Meanwhile, Holly gently led Blaise over to Sirius. Draco soon joined them, Buckbeak trotting up behind.

"How did he get free?" Holly asked in an aside, watching as everyone else moved to their group. "I never untied him. I forgot in all the rush."

"Must have done it himself after I loosened the knot," Draco replied, shock still evident in his tone. "But he's got great timing. We'd have died for sure."

Blaise groaned at that. His pupils were dilated, sweat clinging to his forehead.

Holly was about to speak again, but she abruptly stopped. Something was wrong, infinitely wrong. There was a creeping presence coming towards them, menacing and deadly. She exhaled, seeing her breath in the suddenly freezing air. And the darkness around them deepened, no longer tranquil and inviting.

"No," Sirius mouthed beside her. "Please no."

Neville sighed heavily. "Circe, what is it now?" He struggled to keep Ron from tipping over.

"Dementors," Snape replied tersely. "Come. We need to leave."

They ran. All of them headed for the Entrance Hall, but there was the flap of cloaks in front of them. That way blocked, they turned to go for the road to Hogsmeade. However, the air turned colder, even more Dementors barring the way. Screams rang in Holly's ears, becoming

louder and clearer with every heartbeat. She drew up her strongest mental shields, but even that wasn't enough to drown them out. A shriek echoed in her head, a flash of green eyes and red hair.

The professor started to direct them to the woods, but he knew it wouldn't work in seconds. More Dementors poured out from between the trees. And they turned to the only option available to them. Yet, even as they went, they knew it was a trap. The Dementors were driving them towards the lake, trying to box them in.

Professor Snape raised his wand. "*Expecto Patronum.*"

And some sort of animal burst forward, but Holly was too distracted to see what. It flew ahead, soon lost in the sea of Dementors.

"*Expecto Patronum.*" Holly joined her own magic. She only formed a silvery mist though, the best she'd ever been able to do.

The mist soon faltered as the Dementors swarmed closer, wiping her mind clean of all happiness. She couldn't think, couldn't concentrate. All of her energy and power were tied up in maintaining her shields.

Beside her, she distantly heard the Potions master again calling his Patronus. He had figured out what was happening, doing his utmost to rectify the situation. Yet, it was too little and too late as they reached the water's edge. The Dementors swooped in and formed a solid wall of cloaked forms, blocking any and all escape. They floated closer, and a putrid stench filled Holly's nose. A decaying hand reached for her face, only to snap back. The pressure on her mind unexpectedly lifted, leaving her in the peaceful shadows of her own thoughts. She blinked as she caught sight of something on the lake.

An animal, bright and radiant as the sun, raced across the water towards the hoard of Dementors. It twisted this way and that, silvery body dancing as it snapped and snarled at each enemy it even came near. And like that, the horrible things were driven off, fleeing for their very lives.

She came back to herself in a fog; her mind was hazy and cloudy, aching from the effort of keeping her shields. Both Draco and Sirius were on the ground, alive but unconscious. Blaise was frighteningly

close to it, not having kept his feet. Luna was on her hands and knees, head bowed. The three Gryffindors were in equally bad shape. Professor Snape was the only other person still standing, but he was very obviously shaken.

“That was amazing, Professor,” Holly murmured in a breathless voice as she managed to focus on him. She swayed precariously.

“That wasn’t me, Miss Potter,” the Potions master corrected. His eyes were wide, and his hands shook ever-so-slightly as he attempted to steady her. “That wasn’t my Patronus at all.”

However, the girl didn’t catch the last part. Black was etching into her vision. Her head swam, and her body was so very heavy.

“Miss Potter!” Holly heard in the distance as she sank to the ground, sand beneath her fingertips. “Potter! **Holly!**”

But then, all she saw was black. And Holly knew no more.

Cave Canem: Beware of Dog.

AN: I couldn’t quite finish before our cruise, and I didn’t have my laptop with me. Anyway, this section of the story is in its final few chapters, so enjoy it while you can. I plan to take a little break in between years. Also, I’m doing a re-edit of my other big series, and I think that I may start writing on it again.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Past Imperfect

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Past Imperfect

Holly groaned and opened her eyes. Her mind was dull, shields at the max, Blaise a very distant and muted presence. The girl fumbled for her glasses on the bedside table and blearily peered around, but it took her a moment to realise that she was in the Hospital Wing. Draco and Blaise were on beds on either side of her, clearly unconscious. Ron was in the same state directly across, a bandage wrapped around both his leg and head. In the bed to his left, Hermione laid on her side, making it difficult to tell if the girl was awake. However, Holly had the distinct impression that she was not. Neville was likewise still knocked out just to her left. Luna completed their little group, but unlike the others, her eyes were wide open, staring straight back at Holly.

The older girl started and briefly wondered what by Salazar was going on. But then, she remembered.

Wormtail. Hagrid's hut. The Gryffindors. The Shrieking Shack. Professor Snape. Remus. Werewolf. Dementors.

All of this passed through her mind in an instant, leaving a sinking realisation. Peter Pettigrew was gone. And with him, their only chance to set Sirius free.

Holly squeezed her eyes shut painfully, but they flung open seconds later. Her head turned to Luna, and she opened her mouth to speak. The blonde, however, pressed a finger to her lips and gestured with her other hand to the door.

The Slytherin blinked at her and very slowly gave her a mental prod. "Luna? What's going on?"

"We've got to stay quiet. Fudge is just on the other side of the door with Dumbledore and Snape." She suddenly trembled. "He's going to take Sirius. Probably to give him the Kiss somewhere other than school grounds. No trial. No nothing."

The older girl goggled at her. "What! But Dumbledore--"

“--Is doing his best to stop it,” Luna interrupted. “But there’s a whole squad of Aurors here. And Fudge won’t see reason.” She exhaled and rubbed a hand over her face. “Even Professor Snape is against it. Sickened by how adamant Fudge is about the whole thing.”

Holly shook her head in disbelief. “Dumbledore’s in charge of the Wizengamot. Can’t he order them to stop? Or even have them give Sirius Veritaserum?”

“The Aurors are either loyal to Fudge or think that Sirius is too dangerous to believe,” Luna cut in tiredly. “They want him subdued as quickly as possible. And the headmaster hardly wants a battle to break out between them and the professors.”

“Maker, there has to be something we can do?” Holly sent back with growing dread. “What about everyone here, in the hospital wing? We all saw Pettigrew.”

Luna shrugged rather helplessly. “Draco is knocked out for the long haul. He doesn’t have shielding like us. He got the full force of the Dementors. Madam Pomfrey had to sedate him. Ron has a concussion, and Hermione was hysterical when she woke up. They potioned her back to sleep.”

“And the others? Blaise... and Neville?” the Slytherin prompted. She felt a distinct tingle at the edge of her mind, her bond with Blaise awakening.

The blonde inclined her head. “They should wake up pretty soon. Pomfrey didn’t do anything to them.”

Holly’s gaze flickered to them then. Sure enough, the both were beginning to stir. Neville moaned and rolled over onto his side. His eyes opened with excruciating slowness, and he sat up to blink at them.

Blaise, on the other hand, woke screaming. He rocketed upwards, fingers curling into his bed sheets.

There was a crash in Pomfrey’s office before she came dashing into the ward proper. The nurse nearly ran down Holly as they both

rushed over to the still shrieking boy. But he quieted the instant Holly's hand found his. Blaise's attention flicked to her as he struggled to draw in air, the nurse casting spells in the background. He shook though, practically quaking on the bed, and his eyes were glassy and suspiciously moist. His mind was chaotic, disjointed, fear coming off of him in waves. The girl staggered from the force of it, finding the edge of his bed in the nick of time as her knees weakened entirely.

And of course, the door to the infirmary chose that second to fling open, nearly smacking the wall. Dumbledore entered with Snape hot on his heels; Fudge followed at a more sedate pace. Pomfrey waved them all off, still in the process of casting. The headmaster ignored her and strode up behind Holly, setting his hands on her shoulders. The other two men stilled, Snape's dark eyes fixed on his student. He started a second later as Dumbledore turned to glance at them, something passing between them. The Potions master gave a very discrete nod and not-so-subtly ushered the Minister back into the corridor. The door closed behind them, the old man locking it with a wave of his hand.

There was a tense silence as Blaise calmed completely. He still trembled underneath Holly's fingertips but not as badly as before. His eyes found hers, and she attempted to smile. Yet, it fell horribly flat. Holly swallowed and felt inexplicably exhausted, Dumbledore's grip on her shoulders the only thing keeping her firmly upright.

Pomfrey pursed her lips and surveyed her patients. "Are you calm now, Mr. Zabini?" Her tone was firm, but there was a quiver to her voice.

Blaise nodded but kept quiet.

"The spells should hold for some time, but let me know the instant you feel anxious again," she ordered before looking at the rest of them. The nurse stiffened at realising that Holly and Neville were also now awake. And she opened her mouth to speak, but the old man cut her off.

"Forgive me for my intrusion," Dumbledore said, "but it is vitally important that I speak with them."

Pomfrey glared at him. "I haven't even treated them yet. They've only just woken up, Headmaster. Surely, it can wait." She dug one hand into the pocket of her robes, producing several chocolate bars. The woman promptly handed one to each of the children.

But the headmaster couldn't be swayed. "It can't. A man's life... his very soul is at stake. I will only require a few minutes. They should be fine until then."

Pomfrey paused in taking Luna's pulse and looked at him. Several emotions flittered across her face. She nibbled her lip in indecision, gaze travelling to each of the students in turn.

Holly hastily took a bit of chocolate, trying her best to appear healthy. Neville followed suit, actually managing a grin as the nurse's eyes landed on him.

The woman sniffed. "Fine." Yet, she made no moves to leave.

"Poppy, in private. If you please?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

Pomfrey made a face. Her gaze went from the still quivering Blaise to Holly then Luna and finally Neville. She signed, loud and heavy.

The nurse took a step back. "I... I'll just be in my office." Pomfrey turned on her heel and strode off.

Dumbledore magiced her office door shut behind her and cast a few additional spells around the ward. Once he was done, he turned back to his students, waving Luna and Neville over.

"Sirius is innocent, Headmaster," Holly said without prompting. "Whatever he's told you is true. We saw Pettigrew. All of us did. The Gryffindors, too."

Neville nodded fiercely. "I swear it, Professor. As weird as it sounds, Peter Pettigrew is alive."

Luna added, "He can turn into a rat, but he escaped when Remus turned into a werewolf." She twisted an anxious finger through her hair.

Blaise shuddered at the word. Holly squeezed his hand again, but the old man's attention flicked to them then.

"It's true," the boy murmured. "All of it."

Holly pleaded, "Please believe us."

Dumbledore just looked at them for a moment before letting out a sigh. "I do, my girl." The headmaster's hand went back to her shoulder. "I do believe you, but the Minister does not. He is too eager to put this whole mess behind him. He wants the matter dealt with immediately. Not tomorrow. Or a week from now. But tonight. He plans to give Sirius Black the Kiss this very night." He breathed out very slowly. "They plan to remove him from the castle within the hour, where he will be given straight to the Dementors."

"No," Holly breathed. "No, it can't be."

Luna's hand went to her mouth, worst fears confirmed. Neville weakly shook his head. Blaise bit his lip as hard as he could, actually drawing blood.

Holly stated urgently, "There must be something we can do."

"I have sent Fawkes to summon the other Wizengamot members, but I fear that we will not have the majority we need to stop the Minister in time... or even at all," Dumbledore replied wearily. "And you four can hardly testify in the state you are in. We must first confirm that you are not under any outside influence, but by the time that is done--"

--The Minister will kill Sirius or disappear him or about a thousand other things before we can tell anyone," Holly replied, voice desperate and heartbroken.

Dumbledore peered at her sadly. "I'm afraid that he will, my dear." He looked older in that moment than they had ever seen him.

The back of Holly's eyes prickled then, throat very tight. She made a sound, pained and lost, and her breath refused to leave her lungs. Her hand went to her chest, fingers gripping and twisting. But they encountered a strange resistance, an object hanging around her neck.

Her head snapped up.

“What if we had Pettigrew?” the girl questioned. “What if we showed him to other people, including the Minister himself?”

“But Pettigrew is long gone,” Neville cut in. “We’ll never be able to find him.”

Holly shook her head. “Not now. But we know where he was a few hours ago. Exactly where he was.” She shivered with excitement.

Neville was clearly stumped. “I don’t understand how that helps.”

However, the Dumbledore’s lips curved into a firm smile. Luna and Blaise, too, seemed to comprehend. They exchanged a glance, the blonde’s entire face lifting. The old man studied them but didn’t comment.

“It does indeed help,” Dumbledore responded cheerfully, entire demeanour now changed. “Just trust me, my boy.”

Neville made a strange face but shrugged. “All right. So what exactly are we going to do?”

Holly pulled out her Time Turner. “We are going to use this to go back in time and catch a rat.” She smirked at the Gryffindor’s befuddled expression. “Don’t worry. It’ll work. This is how I’ve been getting to all my lessons this year, even the ones scheduled at the same time.”

And it was like a light suddenly went on in Neville’s brain. His mouth dropped open.

“Hermione has one, too, doesn’t she? It all makes sense now. How she kept disappearing and all.” He rubbed a hand over his chin. “Ron and I’ve been wondering about that.”

Holly gave a curt nod. “Yes, and we’ll use it to snatch Pettigrew. And then, bring him to you, Professor,” she addressed Dumbledore. “Bring him here. To this very room.”

There was a very distinct sparkle in the old man's eyes. "That sounds like a marvellous plan. In the meantime, I do believe that I will distract the Minister. Just as dear Severus is doing at this very minute." His gaze went to Blaise then, and his expressionn gained a sad cast. "My boy," the old man said, gently lowering Blaise back in his bed, "I think it best if you remain here." Dumbledore made a gesture, cutting off the brunet's retort. "There is still a werewolf loose on the grounds, dear child."

Blaise stiffened. "I..."

Holly brushed his free hand over his arm. "Just stay here. We'll be fine. Besides, only three of us can fit beneath the cloak."

The boy sighed. "I'm sorry, Holly," Blaise whispered, not able to meet her eyes.

She squeezed his hand once more. "It's all right. For just this once, let me be strong enough for both of us," she murmured too faintly for the others to hear.

Blaise looked at her. And finally, he squeezed her hand in return. The boy very softly freed himself from her grasp.

Dumbledore moved to the exit then, but fingers on the handle, he halted. "Now, just in case. Sirius is locked in Professor Flitwick's office. I believe that you know the one, Holly." He inclined his head to her. "If all goes well, you will be able to save more than one innocent life tonight. But remember this, all three of you: **you must not be seen**. I am going to lock you in. It is five minutes to midnight. Three turns should do it. Good luck to you."

The door closed behind him with a quiet snap.

Holly stared after the headmaster for several heartbeats before squaring her shoulders. Her eyes went to Blaise, and he nodded. She glanced at Luna and Neville in turn. They both looked back at her, resolve obvious. Holly fingered her Time Turner, motioning for them to come closer. She slipped the chain around both of their necks, just thankful that it was long enough. The girl took a very deep breath and twisted three times.

And the world dissolved into a swirl of colour.

It was frightfully easy to get out of the castle and to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Holly, Luna, and Neville huddled under the Invisibility Cloak near Hagrid's hut, watching in a bizarre sort of fascination as everything happened again. Exactly as it had before.

Draco went to loosen Buckbeak's tether, while his friends entered the cabin. Hagrid shoved them out the back shortly thereafter. Once again, Ron stumbled, Pettigrew using the opportunity to break free. The Gryffindors chased after both of them and out of sight, while the two Slytherins headed for Draco. They were soon gone as well, and it didn't take long for Fudge and his posse to arrive, Dumbledore in tow. They also entered Hagrid's home in short order.

When she was certain that the Minister and his cronies were thoroughly distracted, Holly manoeuvred them closer to Buckbeak. She bent down and eased up the edge of the cloak, using the other side to conceal them from any watchers. Neville quickly mimicked her actions, freeing his own wand. He severed Buckbeak's rope with a single spell, while the girl let out a few Stinging hexes. Her efforts gained an angered squawk from the hippogriff before he tromped to the woods and the protection the trees offered.

Grinning with triumph, they let the cloak fall back into place and retreated from the hut. The trio headed for the Whomping Willow, hunkering down a safe distance away. Holly fetched the Marauder's Map, which was still thankfully in her pocket from earlier. Poor Neville gaped as the parchment came alive. He'd never seen anything quite like this before.

They watched as a dot marked *Severus Snape* exited the Entrance Hall and raced for the Willow. His real life counterpart soon appeared in their field of vision, only to disappear down the tunnel. Not even ten minutes later, Remus repeated the other man's actions. And less than five minutes after that, so did the earlier version of Luna.

Holly blew out a huff of air then and sat down. "Now," she said as the others joined her, "we wait."

Neville sniffed and scrunched his nose. "I guess, but there's one thing I don't understand." When the two girls glanced at him, he continued, "The Dementors. Why didn't they get us? I mean, Snape wasn't able to run them off with that mist-thing he made. His wasn't strong enough. But someone obviously did."

"Patronus," Holly replied, rubbing her hands together. "It's called a Patronus. And no, he couldn't. He told me that it was not him, but I don't know who it was."

"One of the staff perhaps," Luna said, tilting her head to glimpse the stars. "And whoever it was has to be really powerful. It was a corporeal Patronus. I saw it just before I passed out."

Neville tapped his fingers on his leg. "I did, too. It looked like some sort of animal. Like a dog or a big cat."

"McGonagall maybe?" Holly asked, eyes studying the map for a moment. "I didn't see anyone on the other side of the lake, so it could have been her."

The younger girl hummed a few notes to herself. "Or Flitwick. I bet that he could do it."

"So could Sprout," Neville inserted readily. "And a few of the others."

Holly rolled her shoulder, trying to loosen it a bit. "I'm not sure about that."

The blonde added in agreement, "They would have to be really, really powerful. Not even Professor Snape could chase them all off, and he's very strong."

"Well," the sole boy replied, "he was knocked out not five minutes before that. I think he has a valid excuse for not being at the top of his tower." His eyes traced over the nearby tree line.

The Slytherin couldn't help but snort. "Dumbledore, you think then?" she suggested. "Though I can't imagine what sort of Patronus he'd have. I always figured Fawkes or something along those lines."

Luna fiddled with her bottle-cap necklace. "Who knows what it was?"

"Maybe he has more than one form. I mean," Neville went on, still looking at the forest, "he's Albus Dumbledore. The impossible is fair game for him." He paused for a second before sitting up. "Hey! Look! It's Buckbeak." The Gryffindor pointed to a spot not that far away.

"Then, it must be soon," Luna cut in, glancing to Holly and receiving an acknowledging nod.

The Slytherin studied the map, seeing several people in the Whomping Willow tunnel. She gestured for the others to stand, also climbing to her feet. They secured the cloak around them and not a moment too soon as the tree froze that very instant. Remus and Ron appeared followed by Neville, along with Pettigrew and the rest of the gang. And as if by magic, the full moon appeared, triggering Remus' transformation.

It was sheer pandemonium. Even worse watching than experiencing. But they weren't there to just watch.

Holly stuck both of her hands outside of the cloak, wand in one. "*Accio Peter Pettigrew*," she called out loud, not that anyone heard her over the panic.

Instantly, a disgusting rat smacked into her palm. But faster than he could blink, Luna stunned him and Neville magiced on ropes. Holly transfigured a cage from a nearby rock, charming it to be unbreakable and dumping the traitor inside. She slipped back under the cloak, no one the wiser.

"Very nicely done," the Gryffindor put in with a grin. One finger tapped the glass of Pettigrew's cage.

"Don't I know it," Holly replied, but her eyes widened in that moment as something occurred to her. "Dammit. We have to move." She shoved Luna and Neville forward. "Remus is going to run this way."

The Ravenclaw stumbled, but she kept her feet thanks to Neville. Holly shepherded them away from the woods. However, that would

either put them going across the grounds or back towards Hagrid's cabin. Both were bad options.

"Where can we go?" Luna questioned, face full of worry.

The older girl thought hard. "The other side of the lake." She directed them towards the water. "The Dementors never went that way."

'Besides,' she silently added to herself, 'we'll be able to see who cast the Patronus.'

They dashed towards the lake, managing to elude any and all Dementors along the way. Neville and Luna both dropped to their knees once they got there, not really used to physical exertion and panting heavily. Holly kept her feet, but she was still a bit winded. Nevertheless, she craned her head around, hoping to catch sight of their mysterious saviour.

But Holly didn't see anybody. No one at all. Not even when she heard the sounds of their past selves on the other side of the lake, the water allowing their shouts to carry. Not even when she felt the soul-numbing cold of the Dementors or saw the water begin to freeze over. Not even when she witnessed Professor Snape's Patronus fly out, only to be overwhelmed.

The Slytherin looked around frantically. From their side to the other and back. No one. No one at all. No one but them...

Holly could have slapped herself for her stupidity.

She lifted her wand to the sky. "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*"

An animal burst forth, brighter than every star combined. Only, it wasn't a dog or any kind of big cat. Not a lion or tiger. It glowed like a small, whitish sun and glided over the lake, four paws skimming the water playfully. It reached the far shore, charging at the Dementors, snapping at their heels as they fled in panic.

Soon, they were all gone. And the animal trotted back over to where Holly numbly stood. She gaped at her Patronus.

A wolf. A white wolf.

Its... *his* reddish gold eyes stared straight back at her. He inclined his furry snout in a distinct bow, lupine mouth curving upwards. He let out a short bark before throwing his back his head and howling. The wolf faded into mist then, but the sound lingered for a moment.

"Holly," Luna called breathlessly. "That's amazing. Absolutely amazing." She struggled to her feet, Neville right beside her.

The older girl blinked as though coming out of a daze. "It's Blaise."

"What?" the other two asked together.

"Blaise... my Patronus. It's him." Holly put her hand over her mouth. "It's always him."

Luna smiled. "He's your protector, so I suppose that it makes sense."

Neville just shook his head, watching as the mist faded away completely. "But talk about ironic."

The Slytherin blinked and sighed very softly. Luna, meanwhile, made a noncommittal sound in the back of her throat. Silence descended among them as they watched Snape across the lake levitating their past selves back to the castle. The three lingered for a while, trying their best to time everything out right.

Finally, Holly spoke again.

"Let's go. Sirius still needs us." She threw the cloak back around them, eyes lingering for a second on the spot she had last seen the wolf.

The journey across the grounds was easy enough. They didn't see a single soul as they traversed the Entrance Hall and up the stairs to the Hospital Wing. Still under the cloak, they were surprised to find the headmaster standing just outside the door. He was apparently alone.

"You are a little late," Dumbledore put in with a grin as they revealed themselves, eyes landing on Pettigrew in his cage. "But not to worry. We will be there for the finale." He motioned them forward. "Now, let us hurry to the Great Hall. I dare say that we will find the Minister and his guests there."

Sure enough, the old man was right. Fudge was just inside the doors to the Great Hall, tapping his foot and shifting from side to side nervously. There were several Aurors nearby, including Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Holly could only assume that the rest were fetching Sirius from elsewhere in the castle. Nearly the entire faculty was with them, running interference and altogether annoying the Minister.

Dumbledore and three students were just coming out of a shortcut to the Entrance Hall, when another group of people descended the stairs. Six Aurors, four with their wands out and ready arranged in a circle. The other two were in the middle, on either side of Sirius, all but dragging him by the arms. The Animagus himself was trussed up like a Christmas goose. He had shackles around both his ankles and wrists, along with magically binding ropes around his midsection. The only thing missing was the gag.

Professors McGonagall and Flitwick flitted about the edge of the circle. Even from the distance, Holly could tell that they were very angry.

"Excellent," Fudge stated pompously as they dragged Sirius over to the door of the Great Hall. "Excellent indeed. We'll just wait for our escort then."

McGonagall's eyes narrowed into slits. "You most certainly will not. I won't have you running more rampant in this castle than you already have." Her mouth was a line, becoming thinner by the second.

"The Dementors will be meeting us right here, madam. There is no cause for concern," the Minister replied, turning away from her to speak with an Auror. "Go and fetch them, Dawlish."

For once, Flitwick was not smiling at all. "There is every cause for concern. We won't allow such... **monsters** inside the school. Not with

children present! The headmaster forbid it, and so do we.” The little teacher trembled with suppressed fury.

“Pish.” Fudge gave a dismissive albeit vaguely nervous wave. “The students are all under lockdown in their Common Rooms. It’s not like the Dementors’ll be wandering the halls.”

Sprout stepped in then, coming out of the gathered faculty. “They will not enter this castle. Not now. And certain not ever. Not while we are here.” She fingered her wand. “We will drive them off if we have to.”

Fudge looked absolutely appalled as the other staff members also produced their wands. “No, you won’t. Aurors--”

He was about to say something undoubtedly foolish when Kingsley Shacklebolt stepped in.

“Minister, I don’t recommend such an action at this time.” The dark-skinned man then faced the faculty. “Everyone, please remain calm. We’ll sort this all out.”

“It doesn’t need to be sorted out,” Snape responded with a deadly smooth voice. “Dementors are not welcome at Hogwarts. If they are even able pass the wards to get inside.”

Fudge whirled around. “I think that is enough from you.” He huffed and pulled his chest up like a peacock. “You’re on the edge as it is, **Mister** Snape.”

Around him, the Aurors shifted their stances ever-so-subtly. Clearly ready for a fight. The teachers didn’t back down either, most producing their wands.

In the meantime, Dumbledore extracted Pettigrew from his cage. And with a wave of his wand, the rat was once more a pitiful, little man. He allowed the students to take hold of him with their own wands but motioned for them to remain where they were as he walked over to the Minister. Not that the other man noticed.

“What exactly were you doing out on the grounds tonight?” Fudge said with a superior look. “Perhaps helping Black. With your background, anything is possible.”

The Potions master stiffened, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him before he could retort.

“I would be careful, if I were you, Cornelius,” Dumbledore commented in a light tone. “This is private property. You are here only at our bequest.” He gazed at the Minister with bright eyes, a subtle taste of power on the air. “Now, as to the matter of Peter Petti--”

“Peter Pettigrew is dead,” Fudge cut in sharply. “Deceased! I won’t hear more of this matter. He is dead. Black killed the man.” He was practically shouting, voice rather shrill.

Holly took her cue. “Then, how do you explain him, Minister?”

She levitated Pettigrew to the doors of the Great Hall, but she cut out the spell then. He dropped like a stone to the floor but didn’t even stir.

In the background, Sirius made a noise that might have been a snicker. And there was a universal gasp. Followed by a wave of murmurings.

“Pettigrew.”

“It **is** him!”

“Maker... it’s unbelievable.”

“All this time, he was really alive.”

“But that means that Black is inno--”

Fudge broke in, “Im-impossible.” He threw his arms in the air. “Clearly an imposter.”

“I don’t know, Minister,” Kingsley inserted as he knelt and ran his wand over the traitor. “All the spells are coming back clean. It could very well be him.”

“I... I...” Fudge struggled to collect himself, eyes flickering from Holly to Pettigrew to Sirius and then all around. “It... It doesn’t matter. Take both of them.” He gesture for the Aurors. “We’ll question them at the Ministry.”

But Dumbledore stepped forward then, expression defiant. “You will not take Sirius Black from this castle, Minister Fudge. He will remain here, at Hogwarts, until this entire mess is sorted out.” The old man let loose a burst of power, magic swirling around him.

The Minister inched backwards. And Holly could visibly see him fighting to draw in air. He swallowed hard, face white as the moon.

“I... But no...” Fudge seemed to recover. “He must come with us. He’s an escaped criminal!”

Holly spoke up. “One who was never convicted. Or even given a trial, Minister. I wonder just how and why that was.”

Several people goggled at her. Even as Fudge whirled to face her.

He declared, wringing his hands, “That’s completely untrue.”

“Is it?” Holly scoffed faintly. “I looked through copies of the records myself. But they had no mention of a trial, only that he had been caught and sent to Azkaban.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “I bet that he was never even questioned in the first place.

“I don’t see why we can’t question him right now. Hogwarts is as good a place as any,” Flitwick cut in wickedly, and he took a giant step forward. “Severus, you do have Veritaserum, don’t you?”

There was an evil smirk in the younger teacher’s voice. “But of course. And it just so happens that I have a vial with me.” He pulled out a small potion’s bottle that was filled with a clear liquid.

“But... But...” the Minister tried to interrupt, but it was rather clear that he had long ago lost control of the situation.

“Splendid,” Dumbledore said with a smile. “Let us take this to the Great Hall proper. Might as well be comfortable.” The headmaster ushered them forward.

He handily ignored Fudge’s protests and motioned that they should take Sirius, even as Flitwick levitated Pettigrew. The Aurors all exchanged a look but complied as they once more caught sight of the faculty. Dumbledore conjured two chairs inside the hall, one a squashy and purple armchair, the other something that wouldn’t look out of place in a dungeon. The Aurors wisely chose to set Sirius in the first as Flitwick none-too-gently dropped Pettigrew in the second. McGonagall was even kind enough to conjure more ropes around him along with a spell to keep him from transforming.

Everyone quickly gathered around, though only the three students sat at a house table. Sirius took the Veritaserum willingly, his face going slack as it took effect, and the questioning went much as Holly expected. Sirius affirmed that he hadn’t been the Secret Keeper and that he had never betrayed her parents. His audience even gasped and whispered in all the right places.

Almost unanimously, they turned to Pettigrew afterwards. Professor Snape dripped the potion down the traitor’s unconscious throat before McGonagall awakened him with her wand.

Holly just closed her eyes and did her utmost not to listen. She didn’t need to hear him confess a second time. Didn’t need to hear her parents’ friend retell his betrayal. The Slytherin simply leaned into Luna’s warm weight beside her, wishing with all of herself that Blaise was there. But he was only a vague presence in the back of her mind, once more unconscious.

The girl, on the other hand, was a torrent of emotions inside. Hope. Despair. Anxiety. Hate. Perhaps even love. Holly just wanted this to be over. For Sirius to be cleared. For Pettigrew to get what was coming to him. For it to all work out. For it to all be over.

Her belly churned. Throat dry as the Sahara. One hand reflexively clenched and unclenched. Tired in a way that should be impossible, as though she hadn’t slept in years. Mind pulled in tightly, shields at the max.

She just wanted it to all be over. To finally be able to breathe.

The Slytherin didn't even know how much time had passed when she felt Dumbledore kneel down in front of her. He reached for her, and Holly's eyes snapped open.

"My dear, it is over now." His voice was soft. "The Minister and Aurors are gone." He placed a hand under her chin and lifted her head when she wouldn't look at him. "Mr. Pettigrew is with them."

"But not Sirius?" she asked very quietly.

"No, Holly," he replied with twinkling eyes. "Sirius is right here and will remain here until his name is completely cleared." The old man grinned, hand smoothing her hair back. He rose and moved to the side then, revealing the scene behind him.

Vector and Rosetta spoke in low tones. Snape hovered nearby, part of the conversation but not making any addition to it, gaze fixed on his students. McGonagall and Sprout were both teary-eyed, the former's hand over her mouth. And Professor Flitwick... He was freeing Sirius from his shackles.

Holly just stared before hopping to her feet. She easily slid between Dumbledore and Neville, darting over to her godfather. He grabbed her in a big hug as the last of his bindings disappeared, not even caring about their audience. Sirius squeezed her tightly, chin resting on her forehead.

"Thank you," he murmured in her ear. "Thank you so much. You saved me." The man sounded as exhausted as she felt.

However, Holly simply smiled. And kept smiling. Face nearly splitting with her happiness. Heart beating wildly in her chest. She felt that she could produce the world's best Patronus. The strongest ever.

Everything was going to be all right now. It would all be fine. It was all over.

And Holly let out the breath she hadn't even been aware she was holding.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Black Dawn

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Black Dawn

Draco Malfoy was not happy. Not happy at all. The word paled in comparison to his current emotion, trembled and ran for cover. It wept and pleaded for mercy, begged for forgiveness.

Holly, on the other hand, just sighed and fought the urge to roll her eyes.

"You went without me!" He shot her a hurt look, resembling a kicked puppy or Sirius when he knew he'd done something wrong. "I can't believe that you went without me! You left me behind, Potter! Behind! With Weasley and Granger!"

Holly tugged at the edge of her hospital gown and settled Tom's diary on her knees. "You were unconscious at the time. That's not my fault." She shifted on her bed but knew better than to get up; Pomfrey would have her head if she so much as put a toe on the floor.

Draco did not seem impressed by her logic. "You had a Time Turner," he retorted. "You could've waited for me." He crossed his arms over his chest.

"We didn't know how long that would take," she replied and cast a glance to the bed beside her. "Besides, Blaise stayed, too."

The brunet inclined his head but didn't say anything. There was a peculiar cast to his face, gaze distant and searching.

Draco sniffed. "That's different. You even chose to take Longbottom over me. Longbottom!" He was about to continue when a pillow unexpectedly hit him square in the face.

"Will you shut up already?" Milli asked rhetorically. "I thought it'd quiet down with the Gryffindors gone, but Circe, you're louder than a whole tower of them." She lounged back in her chair next to Holly's bed.

"Amateurs," the blond scoffed, ignoring her completely. "They got off light. Only stayed one night and left first thing this morning."

Another pillow promptly hit him in the face.

Pansy ordered from next to Draco, "Shush up. We can't hear the rest of the story over your griping. Whine about it later. I want to know what happened."

"But they went without me!" Draco interrupted, waving his hands madly.

Pansy ducked to avoid being hit.

"We know that already," Theo put in from Holly's other side. "You've reminded us enough times."

Draco opened his mouth, but Pansy silenced him with a fierce glare.

Milli smirked. "Go on, Holly. I really want to know what happened after Fudge and his goons left." She reached forward to pat the smaller girl's hand.

"Not much," Holly admitted. "Dumbledore hustled us back up to the Hospital Wing. Pomfrey nearly had a heart attack when she saw that we had left. Then, she forced all of us – even Sirius – into bed." She glanced at her godfather, seeing that he was quietly watching them. "The Gryffindors got to go this morning, even Neville. McGonagall personally escorted them back to the tower."

"The rest of us had a worse reaction to the Dementors, I suppose," Luna went on as Holly paused. "Then, the three of you showed up after lunch." She twisted a finger into her hair.

"It was the earliest they would let us out of the Common Room," Theo responded easily. "We even had breakfast in the dorms."

Pansy inclined her head. "The teachers have been busy all morning, as has Dumbledore. Probably getting rid of the Dementors and fighting the Ministry over Sirius."

Milli added, "And Pomfrey would only let three of us in here." She twisted her lips crossly. "We'll probably be mauled for information by the others when we get back."

Of course, the nurse chose that moment to stride out of her office. "Which will be sooner rather than later, Miss Bulstrode." She stood in the middle of the ward. "Out. The lot of you."

Pansy made an unhappy face, while Milli snorted. When the nurse turned to look at them, Theo took the opportunity to lean forward to whisper in Holly's ear.

"I need to talk with you later. Catch me on the train," he suggested, hand resting on her arm.

She gave a brief nod as the nurse shot them all a glare.

"Go on," Pomfrey prompted. "Out with you."

Knowing better than to complain, the three visitors reluctantly rose to their feet and headed for the door. And Holly quickly slipped the diary beneath her mattress while the nurse was distracted. Luna, in the meantime, pushed back her covers and made to follow, but Pomfrey instantly stopped her.

"Not you, Miss Lovegood." She gently eased the girl back into bed. "Not yet. Perhaps later."

Luna didn't respond, instead humming to herself. Sirius snickered. Theo turned to wave at them as he left, and Milli shoved him out the door when he lingered a bit too long. Pansy simply blew them a kiss. Blaise gave a small nod of his head, leaning back against his pillows. Draco sniffed disdainfully and recrossed his arms. Holly just smiled.

Pomfrey, in turn, bustled around and checked her patients. She paused by the Animagus' bed and tutted as she scanned him with her wand.

"I don't understand why I had to come here," Sirius commented after a minute. "There's nothing wrong with me."

Madam Pomfrey glanced down at him, her mouth a stern line. "You were in Azkaban for twelve years, Sirius Black. And then on the run for months afterwards. Not to mention the Dementors from last night. I'm simply ensuring that you are in top shape." Her face softened then.

“We wouldn’t want to lose you now that we’ve just gotten you back.” She patted him on the shoulder, eyes suspiciously bright.

Sirius opened his mouth to say something but apparently thought the better of it. “I can perfectly well take care of myself,” the man insisted instead.

“Of course, you can dear,” the woman absentmindedly replied, hand smoothing his hair.

The Animagus made a face and did his best to pull away. “That’s enough of that now.”

Pomfrey’s eye twitched, and he promptly shut up. The nurse nodded to herself as she moved over to Blaise’s side. Moments stretched by in silence as Pomfrey went to each bed in turn, finally ending with Holly. She was just about to start her diagnostic when the door to the Hospital Wing opened softly.

“What is it?” the nurse demanded before looking up. “Ah, Remus. What are you doing here? I thought I told you to rest today.” Her eyes narrowed again.

Holly could understand why. The man was rather haggard looking with large circles under his eyes. He all but radiated tiredness, shoulders sagging. Regardless, there was a sparkle to his eyes, fierce and burning.

Remus pressed his hands together in front of him. “Ah... yes, you did. But I feel much better now, and I was wondering if I might visit.” His gaze travelled around the room, landing on Holly momentarily.

She winked and jerked her head in Sirius’ direction.

The professor involuntarily looked that way, almost jumping. Sirius stared back, opening his mouth to say something. However, Remus ripped his eyes away then as Pomfrey loudly cleared her throat.

“I’ll allow it, but only if you don’t get them too excited.” The woman studied him carefully. “And perhaps you should start with Mr. Black first,” she suggested more to herself than to him.

But he wasn't really listening anyway, eyes still on Sirius. Almost unwittingly, he went towards the other man's bed. Yet, he seemed to come back to himself halfway there, glancing at the nurse.

"A bit of privacy, if you would?" the werewolf questioned in an almost breathless tone, gaze going back to Sirius.

"He's not leaving that bed," Pomfrey commanded, hands on her hips. Her expression gentled then, filled with a sense of comprehension and compassion. "You'll just have to stay in here, my dear. Take as much time as you need." She sniffled faintly and turned back to Holly a second later, face now unreadable.

Remus shifted from on foot to the other. "I'll just do a privacy ward then." He gave her a winning smile, one tainted with a hint of nervousness.

Then, his eyes flickered to Holly, and she gave a grin of encouragement, feeling the emotions churning inside him. The other students watched quietly as he made his way to Sirius' bed. Remus hesitated for a heartbeat before settling down in the chair just in front of him and waving his wand in an intricate pattern. A giant bubble formed around them, turning a deep purple-blue after it had set. Not even the outline of the two men could be seen. It went without saying that they couldn't be heard either.

The students all blinked and then exchanged a lengthy look. Holly herself leaned back against her pillows and let Pomfrey do as she wished. But the girl's eyes lingered on the obscuring ward for several minutes. It would be a long time before Remus would emerge. Hours and hours. Long after dinner and even after Holly herself had fallen asleep.

The third day after Sirius' rescue dawned bright and clear. A beautiful and glorious day. Most especially when Holly saw the headline of the *Dailey Prophet*.

"Sirius Black Declared Innocent!"

It was followed by a lengthy article, which Holly simply skimmed over as she seated herself in Sirius' new quarters. She knew the gist of it already. Sirius' testimony, along with that of the faculty, had been more than enough to clear him. He hadn't even been made to leave the castle. Director Bones and a few members of the Wizengamot had simply come to Hogwarts the day before and viewed a pensive memory before speaking with several professors. That was all it had taken to clear him. Of course, having that treacherous rat in Auror custody didn't hurt.

Naturally, it hadn't taken very long for the entire story to break in the papers. And the first headline was followed by several others.

"Peter Pettigrew Found Alive! To Be Tried Before Wizengamot."

"Sirius Black Usurps Guardianship Of Girl-Who-Lived! Seeking Undisclosed Settlement."

"Ministry In Near Shambles After Secret Keeper Revelation!"

"Sirius Black Says 'Yum! I Love Fudge. Especially Over Ice Cream.'"

The last one was obviously from the Quibbler, and it made Holly laugh for several minutes as she read over the article. It was very obviously written by Luna's father and didn't once mention Azkaban, Pettigrew, or Voldemort. Sirius found it equally funny when she showed it to him.

However, there was no amusement on their faces as they read the next headline.

"Hogwarts Professor Is Really Werewolf!"

"That effing bastard!" Holly declared as she threw down her copy of the *Hogsmeade Times*. "I can't believe that horrendous ponce Fudge would do this. And to Remus!"

Sirius sighed. "Bloody wanker he is, I'm not all that surprised. To be honest, we should have expected this. We knew that Fudge would want to strike back at us for making him look like the moron he really is." The man rubbed a hand over his suddenly tired face.

Holly stood up. "Well, we'll just have to tell Remus that we don't care about any of it." She was on the verge of marching out the door.

"Remus resigned, Holly," Sirius interrupted before she could even take a step. "He packed up his things and left this morning before dawn. A friend of Sprout's at the paper warned her about the story, and she told Dumbledore last night."

She just blinked at him in shock. "But why? He's the best teacher we've ever had." The Slytherin slowly sank back onto the sofa.

"True," her godfather acknowledged. "But even now, Dumbledore's office is full of Howlers from angry parents. Ones demanding that he fire the 'monstrous beast teaching my children.'"

Holly could tell that was a direct quote.

"Racist gits," she muttered, eyes now slits. "The lot of them. He is only dangerous when he doesn't take his potion. And there were extenuating circumstances this time!"

"I know." Sirius shook his head. "Don't I know it? They all remind me of my own damn parents. Hated everything and everyone that wasn't pureblood, magical, or rich. Loathed blood traitors and half-breeds." He reached over to take her hand, giving a fierce squeeze. "But that's not the point, little fawn. It's just like you said. Remus is only dangerous without the potion, and he didn't take it. You all could have died. You could have been bitten. Without Snape and Buckbeak, you probably would have." Sirius squeezed her hand again. "Remus resigned because he knew that he should have been more careful. He just can't take that kind of risk."

The girl looked away, wiping at her eyes with her free hand. "But... but... He didn't even tell me he was leaving."

"I know, love," Sirius said gently, heart aching in his chest. "But it's better this way, and you know it. You wouldn't have been able to change his mind, and it would have hurt you more to watch him go." He tilted his head up and blew a piece of hair from his nose. "Besides, you'll see him after school lets out. I suspect that he'll be over at the house all the time."

Holly took a shuddering breath and shoved away her misery as best she could. The Slytherin locked it away, doing her utmost to mollify her thoughts with the promise of her new home with Sirius and seeing Remus there. It seemed to work and made her feel slightly better.

Indeed, Sirius' home was a very good distraction. The Animagus himself hadn't been there for over a decade, since before his imprisonment, and he hadn't dared return after his escape, knowing that it would be one of the first places anyone with sense would look. Still, it was his, a gift from his uncle. Once a rather nice house along the outskirts of a mostly Muggle village, just a few kilometres away from where Holly's parents had once lived. Not too far from Milli and Daphne to be completely honest.

However, from here, her thoughts inevitably took a different turn.

She exhaled slowly. "I know that I have to stay with the Zabinis for a while," Holly changed the subject.

"Only for a few weeks," Sirius acknowledged. "The house will be ready by then. It's been abandoned for a while now. McGonagall told me that nobody bothered with it after..." He cleared his throat. "It's been left alone."

The girl felt a prickle of concern. "The wards and everything still work, right?"

"They should, so all my stuff should still be inside," he replied after a moment. "And Flitwick and Dumbledore both are going to help me put up some new ones. Not to mention that Remus will help me clean up everything. Maybe I'll borrow a few House Elves from Hogwarts. They'd love the extra work."

Holly nodded but remained quiet. The conversation dwindled then, and they sat in companionable silence for a long while. Both were lost in thought, Holly's mind whirling with doubts and worries. She wondered what would happen to Remus now. As a werewolf, it would be difficult for him to find another job, especially since everyone now knew about his condition. Further, Pettigrew knew she was a Mind Mage, and it was a sinking and twisting worry he would reveal that to

the Ministry. A slim chance perhaps but one nonetheless. And she didn't even want to think about what else could go wrong.

The Ministry could suddenly decide that her godfather was unfit and ship her back to the Dursleys. Pettigrew might escape. Blaise might not get over his fear of werewolves. Voldemort could return to full power. Sirius might be hit by the Knight Bus.

All right... perhaps not the last one. Yet, trust that when something good would finally happen to her, it would be countered with several near tragedies. Such was her life.

Almost like he knew what she was thinking, Sirius rose from his seat and plopped down next to her on the sofa. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and listened to her breathe for several heartbeats. But he spoke when he felt a tremble beneath his fingertips.

"You'll see." Sirius pulled her further into the half-hug. "Everything will work out. I'm free. Pettigrew's in jail. Fudge will get his. And Snape didn't even blame you for hexing him."

Holly couldn't help but smirk then, remembering the punishment her Head of House had heaped on the Gryffindors. Neville, strangely, had avoided it for the most part. Even now, he was in the process of serving his single detention with Sprout in the greenhouses. More like a gift than anything else. Professor Snape hadn't even lectured his Slytherins this year for their escapades, knowing it was a wasted venture. Though he had given them a very stern look when he had visited in the Hospital Wing.

"And," Sirius continued, "we'll take care of Remus. It's not like I would make him live in the streets or anything." He glanced away, staring at something faraway.

The girl shivered then, a peculiar tingle going down her spine. "I just worry," she responded. "It has to be hard for him. And with everything else going on..." She shifted against her godfather.

"Everything will be fine. Just fine," he repeated a bit more forcefully this time. "I promise. It will all work out in the end."

Holly had her doubts but didn't voice them. She couldn't help but feel that Sirius was trying to convince himself as much as her.

The last few days of the school year flew by, everyone doing some last minute packing. Of course, the castle was rampant with gossip about Sirius, Pettigrew, and the truth about their beloved Defence professor. Most of the students were sad that he was gone, dreading just who they would end up with in September. Slytherin won both the House and Quidditch cups, no surprise with Holly's skills on a broom or the fact that Dumbledore had awarded her fifty points for her outstanding Patronus. An ecstatic Marcus Flint could be seen shaking hands with just about everyone, glad that they had won in his final year. The rest of the House took it in stride if not a little smugly.

It came as no shock that Holly finished at the top of Slytherin. Vector had actually admitted that she was first in Arithmancy, even beating out Hermione. The Gryffindor girl, in turn, hadn't done quite as well as she normally did. Like always, Neville beat her in Herbology. But she also lost the top spot for Gryffindor in Astronomy to one of her roommates, a nameless brunette with pigtails who Holly didn't know. According to George, Hermione had also been beaten in Muggle Studies by Seamus Finnegan. As such, it wasn't unexpected that she had decided to drop that class along with Divination and had given back her Time Turner.

Holly's friends, in the meantime, were rather put out that they had missed another adventure, but they were pleased that Sirius was a free man. Blaise seemed especially disheartened that he hadn't been able to use the Time Turner with the others, no matter how they tried to reassure him. He was also rather quiet and distracted, eyes often staring unseeingly into the distance. That didn't stop him from following Holly around, very insistent that they be together much of the time. But then, she couldn't really blame him for being clingy with all that had happened. The boy had yet to say anything about that night. Nevertheless, she knew it was only a matter of time.

Leaving day was a godsend as far as most of the school was concerned, anxious to be home. Sirius said his goodbyes in the Great

Hall instead of at the station, knowing that it was best if he not go. He'd probably be mobbed there by well-wishers and the like, all anxious to see the infamous Sirius Black.

Holly was a bit late getting to their compartment on the train, squeezing inside a few minutes before Theo arrived. It was rather crowded with all the people inside, but somehow, they made room for two more. Blaise instantly pulled her down next to him, sitting as close as he could.

Holly was about to open her mouth to speak when there was a sudden and rather loud growl. All eyes flickered to Milli, who was in the process of reading the morning paper.

"What is it?" Luna questioned as she hummed to herself. "The Imps rebelling again?"

Milli made a disgusted sound and read aloud, "*Pettigrew Escapes Ministry!*"

There was a universal chorus. "What!"

"*Peter Pettigrew, thirty-five, escaped Ministry custody sometime last night,*" Milli continued in a fierce tone. "*His methods are still undetermined, but an anonymous Ministry source reported that the Anti-Animagus warding fluctuated between the hours of two and three in the morning. It is assumed that Pettigrew transformed during that time and then later escaped through means unknown. Indeed, our source reports that there were no holes in his cell for him to fit through and that the Monitoring charms never reported his absence. It is possible that he had some outside assistance...*"

She couldn't go on and balled up the *Dailey Prophet*. The heavy-set girl threw it, nailing Gavin in the head unintentionally.

"Bloody useless Ministry," Milli declared.

Holly could only close her eyes. "That about sums it up."

Blaise raised both eyebrows. "You don't seem surprised by this."

She shook her head. "I was just about to tell you. Dumbledore took me aside this morning just before I got on the train."

"Well, they best be out searching for him," Pansy pronounced and lifted her nose into the air. "Not that they'll be able to find him. Couldn't find their own wands with both hands."

"Shacklebolt is the only Auror worth anything, it seems," Draco commented loftily. "How much do you want to bet that he wasn't there last night?"

Theo rolled his eyes. "Sucker's bet that is. Probably the only reason Pettigrew made it out was that very reason."

"He had to have had help," Luna put in, dreaminess gone from her demeanour. "From what daddy has told me of their holding cells at the Ministry, that's the only way he could have made it out."

"But what are you going to do, Holly?" Pansy questioned with a worried expression. "I hope that Sirius knows."

The younger girl thought it over. "I suspect that Dumbledore warned him as well. And Eren and Dante definitely..." She trailed off at their bizarre looks, though Blaise merely gave a small smile. "What?"

"You're not going back to the Muggles then?" Theo asked very suddenly, tone sharp.

Holly blinked. "No..."

Pansy put in, "I..." She corrected when Milli narrowed her eyes, "**We** were worried that they were sending you back to the Dursleys. We were going to kidnap you and take you home with one of us, if they were."

Holly goggled at her. "I... I don't know what to say." She bit her lip. "Thank you." She tightened her hands to fists. "But it is not necessary. I'm going to stay with Blaise. With all that's going on, I must have forgotten to mention it."

"But don't you have to stay with your... relatives?" Gavin inquired far too calmly.

Holly's gaze flickered around the compartment, taking in the faces of her friends. "No. Eren was... is fostering me," she replied. "Professor Snape arranged it. I imagine that he scared several years off of Vernon and Petunia when he showed up on their front step."

The others all breathed out in a rush.

"That's wonderful," Pansy said in a wavering voice.

Gavin agreed, "Simply brilliant. An excellent manoeuvre on Professor Snape's part."

"And it makes sense." Draco nodded. "Severus was fostered by my grandfather." He paused at their surprised expressions. "What?"

"Our head of House was fostered by your family. Was he also... er..." Theo trailed off. His gaze went to Holly, but she studiously avoided looking at him, blushing faintly.

"I don't know for sure. I just know that his parents used to fight a lot, and his mum would hex his father something fierce." The blond shrugged. "At least, that's what father told me."

"Why didn't his father curse her back?" Milli questioned with interest, derailed from her venomous thoughts of Pettigrew.

Draco shifted in his seat. "Well, he was a Muggle for one. Made it kind of hard to use a wand."

"Really?" Pansy inserted, "I had always assumed his father was a half-blood or maybe a Muggleborn since Snape isn't an old family name." She seemed to be almost shocked by this revelation.

"No, he was a Muggle. I think he was a professor at a university. Chemistry, maybe." Draco sighed. "I can't exactly recall."

Everyone considered this. The conversation drifted then, going back to Pettigrew and then to the uselessness of the Ministry. After a while,

they started up a game of Exploding Snap, but after Luna won three times in a row, they quit. Pansy and Milli drifted next door afterwards, where the rest of their year-mates were sitting. No small number of people visited their own compartment over the next few hours. Fred and George were first followed by the various members of the Slytherin Quidditch team. Titania was especially keen on how Holly was holding up, apparently having read about the treacherous rat's escape.

Neville showed up next, nervously shifting from foot to foot. It didn't help that he was receiving some peeved looks from Draco, who was still sore about being left behind. However, Holly greeted him with a smile, and the others warmed up considerably. Gavin even challenged him to a chess match, and they were still playing when the train pulled into the station.

Holly and Blaise stuck together as they departed, pulling their trunks along with them. It wasn't hard to see the Aurors milling about in the crowd as they walked, and even an idiot would have been able to tell why they were there. Nonetheless, the two Slytherins easily spotted Dante over the crowd since he was rather tall and headed over to the pillar he was standing against. The man beamed when he saw them and hugged them both. Holly was rather flustered when he pulled back, noticing a man in a red Auror's cloak studying them intently.

"Don't worry," Dante said in an aside as he spelled both trunks and tucked him in his pocket. "They're only here for show. Pettigrew isn't stupid enough to attack. He is probably long gone by now."

Holly could only nod as the Auror finally looked away.

Blaise's father quite smartly changed the subject. "We're so glad to have you staying with us, Holly." His hand was warm on her shoulder. "Eren will be so pleased to see you, dear. She was sorry she couldn't meet you two here, but she didn't think the baby would do well with the crowd." He steered her towards the exit to the platform and into the train station proper.

The girl remained silent as they weaved around the crowd, thinking, wondering. She didn't even remember the journey to the wizarding shop or through the Floo. Holly didn't come back to herself until

Dante was leading them out towards the back of the Zabini's house. She paused on the threshold, blinking as she took in the sight of Eren rising from the table set out in the garden, a baby in her arms. Belle and Lexie were similarly racing over, enormous smiles very obvious even from the distance.

Holly swallowed hard, overcome by some nameless emotion. She shifted from one foot to the other, but Blaise turned back to her then. He waved with one hand and beckoned her to come out. A sense of calm swept over her, washing away all her doubts as his eyes met hers. For the first time in a week, there was a sparkle present. A laugh on his lips.

And taking a deep breath, Holly stepped forward and into the sunlight.

Finite Incantatem

AN: And thus ends the third part of our story. I know it was very dialogue heavy, but several things needed to be explained. Also, I do plan to continue, but I probably won't pick it up again until sometime in September. I am not sure what my update schedule will be like yet since I'm starting med school, so we'll just have to wait and see. Until then, everyone.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Forty: Child of Faith

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Forty: Child of Faith

Holly Potter woke screaming. Heart beating rapidly in her chest, she flung herself upward in her bed. Her hands shook as she held desperately onto her blanket. The rest of her trembled, sweat-soaked and chilled by the night air. She grasped for air, throat raw, somehow managing to draw a breath.

“Holly?”

The open diary on the chair beside her bed flared to life. A dark-headed boy with equally dark eyes appeared, Hogwarts robes swishing as he stepped forward. However, before he could say anything further, the door to her bedroom silently opened. Another boy slipped inside and shut it behind him, ghosting across the floor to her bed. Unfortunately, someone else already occupied that position, and the two males eyed each other for a moment as they bumped. A silent conversation passed between them in an instant before the older of the two stepped to the side. Blaise climbed onto her bed and settled by the edge.

She was calmer now, no longer hyperventilating. But her hands still shook, and she buried them in her covers to make it stop. Holly inhaled very slowly through her nose and then out through her mouth. Her panic had left her in a wash of tiredness, mind slow and numb.

Blaise quietly slid her glasses onto her face. The room came into sharp focus.

“Voldemort again?” he questioned.

Holly took another shuddering breath. “He was with Pettigrew. They killed an old man who’d stumbled on them.” Her eyes flicked to Tom.

His face was a mask, completely unreadable. But his eyes gleamed with something a lot like regret. Guilt, perhaps. Or sorrow. Possibly all three.

Blaise watched them for a moment before continuing. “Did they say anything like last time?”

Her attention returned to him, and she absentmindedly noticed that his hair was sticking up. "They've left Albania. I think they're back in Britain, but I don't know where." She paused to recall. "A big house. Like a manor or mansion. Not magical. But dirty and almost abandoned."

"Not magical?" Tom tapped his foot on the carpet. "Like a manor... Could you see anything outside?"

"No." Holly shook her head. "What're you thinking?"

Tom studied the far wall. "It might be his... my... Tom Riddle, the original. His parents were very wealthy. Muggle nobility even. He was their only child, so if both they and he are dead, their manor might be empty now."

"Perfect for Voldemort if he knows where it is," Blaise allowed, leaning back against Holly's headboard and placing one hand on her trembling wrist.

"Well, if I know, he should." Tom seemed to be considering. "It was in the same village my mother was from. And I tracked that down when I was still a third-year."

Blaise patted Holly's hand. "Where?"

"It's... It's in..." Tom stumbled. He blinked and furrowed his brow. "I can't... It's there but not."

Blaise and Holly exchanged a look.

"*Fidelius*," the brunet concluded. "Has to be."

Holly concurred, "Definitely." She yawned.

Tom crossed his arms over his chest. "It's so strange. I know it exists, but it's like the knowledge of where leaks through my fingers like water." He exasperatedly rubbed his chin with one hand.

"Don't worry about it. If it really is *Fidelius*, then it's beyond us." Holly exhaled. "We should focus on what we can do. Try to figure out what they're doing."

Blaise glanced at her. "Do you remember anything else?" He rubbed her fingers.

"He mentioned a Ministry witch. Bertha... Jenkins... Jorkins, I think." The girl bit her lip. "Pettigrew captured her while she was on holiday; I think he tortured her for information." She fought to keep herself steady. "Voldemort talked about freeing someone. One of his servants. But he wasn't in Azkaban. And of course, the usual plot to kill me," she jested and then strained for another moment but shrugged. "That's all of it. All I can remember. Maybe I'll think of something else later."

The fact that she might dream of Voldemort and his plots again went unsaid.

Blaise sighed. "I'd hoped things would be better your last night here." He redirected the conversation, "It's hard to believe that a month's already gone by since school let out."

"Hard to believe that she'll be leaving you for Black, you mean," Tom inserted loftily, catching on. A smirk etched onto his lips.

Blaise stilled for a second but allowed the comment to pass. He felt her tremble again beneath his fingertips.

"Holly, are you sure you're all right?" he asked with concern.

The girl hesitated, not completely trusting her voice. "I'm fine. Really. Just tired."

Tom rolled his eyes. "You would say that even if you'd been bitten by a Basilisk. Oh, wait... you have, and you did."

Holly gifted him with a weak glare but didn't argue. It was true enough, but that didn't mean she had to like it. Instead, she just sighed and rubbed over her now aching forehead

"You should go back to sleep," Blaise said as he noted the weary cast to her face and the way her eyes were drooping. He gave her a final pat before sliding off her bed. "Goodnight, Holly." He watched as her eyes drifted half-closed.

She didn't even hear him leave. Nor did she notice Tom give her a searching look before he slipped back into his diary. Holly just laid back and stared up at the ceiling, not seeing as it blurred. It didn't take her long to fall asleep. Just a few minutes and she was lost to blissful darkness. One devoid of all dreams.

The next morning was hazy but promised to clear by noon. Holly sat down to breakfast with the Zabini family as usual, though there was a hint of tension to the air. Eren barely ate, and the two Zabini girls kept shooting her mournful looks over their plates, while their father often sighed and stared off into space. Even Xavier seemed to notice that something was amiss, his usual baby-grin absent. Only Blaise was outwardly normal, but Holly could tell that there was an internal war waging inside of him. He wanted her to be happy, for her to be able to spend time with Sirius. However, he also wanted her to stay with him.

An epic battle of sorts. But eventually her desire to see Sirius won out and just in time for breakfast to be over.

Holly headed upstairs to do one final check of her luggage with Eren following in her wake. The woman was less than enthused to see her charge leave. She still had doubts about the entire arrangement to be perfectly honest. Something very obvious by the thinning of her lips as she stepped into Holly's room.

Quite frankly, they were wary of Sirius.

Certainly, the Animagus had been over at Zabini manor several times for meals, and Holly knew for a fact that both Dante and Eren had seen him on their own. They were hardly about to let her go off with a complete stranger, after all. Regardless of what the Wizengamot decreed. They would fight him if need be, take the children and leave the country. Holly didn't even need her telepathy to figure that one out.

It wasn't that they didn't like him. Eren actually found him rather funny, and Dante liked everyone on principle. However, he was a Black, a

family notorious in their own right. He had also spent a significant portion of his life in Azkaban. Not the stuff of a great guardian and father-figure. Further, the Zabinis didn't know that Sirius had spent the last year masquerading as their son's cat.

Still, Sirius did have several things in his favour. Holly herself for one. Albus Dumbledore for another. He was also on his absolute best behaviour whenever he saw them, completely prank-free. And the fact that he was quietly seeing a Mind Healer three times a week didn't hurt matters either. Nor did the fact that Remus was all but living with him, meaning that Holly and he wouldn't be alone. Even better, Eren didn't share her son's revulsion of werewolves.

All in all, the Zabinis were reluctant but allowing Holly to go on a trial basis. She would have a week to stay with Sirius, and if she wasn't happy by the end of it, she would move back. Of course what Sirius didn't know and what Holly refused to tell was that Eren planned to do this every week for at least the rest of the summer. The Zabini matriarch was going to check back regularly. Just in case.

It went without saying that Blaise would be his mother's eyes and ears, probably Flooing over every day if he could get away with it. And of course, Holly would see them at the World Cup in August. This didn't even include the fact that both Dante and Eren had insisted Sirius and Holly have dinner with them at least once a week. Or that the Zabini girls had already made her promise to come over for a genuine tea party. Or even the invitation to spend the day with her Slytherin year-mates at Whimsic Alley, the theatre and art district in Edinburgh.

Holly suspected that Narcissa Malfoy had a hand in the last. Especially when the Slytherin remembered that Draco had been the one to give the invitation and the fact that his mother and Sirius were cousins.

But all of this didn't mean that Eren and Dante were any less concerned. A fact that solidified when Eren sat Holly down on her bed.

"Are you certain about this, *hija*?" the older woman questioned softly. "We'd love to keep you longer. The entire summer if you'd allow us. Even longer." She shifted and very slowly closed her eyes. "It is just

that we don't know Sirius Black. Not really. Yes, he is your godfather and was innocent of those crimes, but we have only known him a month. And he's never had a child or a teenager. Much less a young witch." Eren took Holly's hand.

The girl exhaled but allowed the action. "I don't want to impose upon your family," she put in after a moment. "You've done more than enough. More than I can ever repay."

"You don't have to repay us." Eren shook her head. "You are our family, dear heart. Legal and binding." She swallowed. "And not just because I am fostering you. Blaise is like a different person since he met you. So much more open. Less lonely. You're the first real friend he's ever had besides his cousins." The woman exhaled softly. Her eyes flickered to the far wall, gazing out the window at nothing.

"I know that the way I raised my children kept them isolated. But I was so afraid to lose he and his sisters," she admitted, fingers grasping Holly's firmly. "I nearly didn't let him attend Hogwarts, but I'm so glad that I did. I can hardly recognise the laughing boy I see. That alone would put me in your debt forever." She smiled then and turned back to the girl at her side. "But I'm afraid that you have worked your magic on us as well. I honestly feel like I have three daughters instead of two."

Holly was speechless.

Eren laughed. "Don't be so surprised, my dearest heart. You have to know that it's true. If we could outright adopt you, we would." She seemed ready to add something to that but apparently changed her mind.

"I..." the Slytherin began through her suddenly tight throat. "Th--"

"You don't have to thank me. Not for this," the woman interrupted.

The girl bit her lip. "I do appreciate everything you've done for me, more than you could ever know. But Sirius... I need to do this." She felt Eren's fingers tighten around her own. "Sirius has lost a lot. Both before and after Azkaban. I can't leave him to rot like everyone else did. I think... I think this is just as much for him as for me."

The older witch just studied her for a moment before nodding. "You are very kind, *hija*. Compassionate. No matter what happens, never let anyone take that away from you. Not even me." She paused and took a slightly shuddering breath. "We'll be sad without you here, but you are old enough to make your own decisions now. Just know that you will always be welcome here. With us." Her face took on a more cheerful cast. "Now, remember, we expect you for dinner on Thursday. No excuses. And make sure that your godfather is here, too."

"Of course," Holly replied, the knot in her chest loosening. "Even if I have to drag him here."

Eren gave a satisfied jerk of her head. With a wave of her wand, all of Holly's possessions shrunk to the size of a snap deck. The Slytherin nodded her thanks and quickly tucked her trunk away. She looked up then, gaze meeting Eren's watery but firm eyes.

"Thank you," Holly whispered anyway.

She didn't have to say what it was for.

"So," Sirius asked from just behind her shoulder, "what do you think?"

Holly stared up at the three-storey Victorian, practically gaping. When she had imagined Sirius' house, this hadn't been it. She had expected something a bit... well, not dirtier but less kept and clean. This was the same house he'd had before Azkaban, and no one had taken care of it in the interim as far as she knew. Even with an army of house-elves, which he most certainly lacked, Sirius would have had to put in a lot of work.

His house was a cheerful yellow with bright blue shutters. All right, perhaps that was pure Sirius. But the lawn was neatly trimmed with well-kept flowers and rose bushes. The house itself was nice; there was no other word for it. The windows practically sparkled they were so clean. There was even a white-picket fence out front.

It was all astonishingly normal. Almost Muggle. Especially when compared with the monstrosities she had seen in Hogsmeade proper.

Behind her, Sirius shifted from foot to foot. Anxious since she still hadn't said anything. It was clear that he wanted her approval. Holly had a feeling that they had side-long Apparated and not just Flooed inside for this very reason.

"I love it," she murmured and turned to face him. "I love it. It's wonderful." Her smile was unsurprisingly genuine.

If he were in dog form, Holly would have seen his tail wag with excitement. "Just wait until you see the inside." He grabbed her wrist and then, pulling her along and up to the blue front door.

It was unlocked, swinging open at their approach. Holly only had a moment to wonder at that before she was tugged into the foyer. Again, everything was normal enough aside from the moving paintings in the hallway. The sitting room was a repeat of the same, tastefully decorated and clean but not Petunia-ish. It lacked the electronics found in most Muggle homes, but the girl recognised a magical radio and a few other things. Sirius even had a clock like Molly Weasley with things like Mortal Peril, Hogwarts, Prison, and Dead in place of the numbers. However, there were only four hands on the clock instead of nine.

Holly walked over to peer at the names. Remus, Sirius, herself, and...

"Dobby?" Her head whipped around so fast that she had a crick in her neck. "The house-elf?"

"Yeah," Sirius replied from beside the fireplace, undoubtedly the Floo connection. "After you freed him, Remus tracked him down. Said that it would be easier than buying one. Not to mention cheaper and 'the moral thing to do.'"

Holly could tell that was a direct quote.

"He's always popping all over the place, not that I mind. But the clock helps us keep track of him," the Animagus went on. "It was Remus' idea."

She considered that but said nothing. Sirius seemed to take that as silent permission to show her the rest of the house. It had the usual rooms. Kitchen. Dining room. Another parlour with a second fireplace. A study that she suspected belonged to Remus. A small library that was still easily three-times the size of her room at the Dursleys. As from the library, the upstairs was mostly bedrooms as far as she could tell, though why her godfather would need so many was beyond her. But then, he hadn't built the house. It had been a gift from his uncle.

Remus had his own room, as did Sirius himself. Her bedroom was next to his at the end of the hall, and she hesitated outside the doorway, eyeing the inscribed nameplate. She glanced at him, unexpectedly nervous, but her godfather merely grinned. With a slightly shaking hand, she turned the knob and walked inside.

Holly gasped. Somehow, she ended up in the middle of the room without knowing how she got there. Turning a full circle as she tried to take it all in.

"Is this for me?" she asked, voice full of awe.

The walls were green but not the Slytherin shade. More like the colour of new leaves. And there was some very intricate stencilling of leaves and ivy along the top, corners, and the edges by the windows. Upon closer inspection, they extended onto the walls proper and were even animated, swaying as if in an imaginary breeze. The furniture was in various wood shades, both dark and light. Somehow matching perfectly with everything else. A rich oak desk by the windows. A lighter wardrobe off to the side. A much darker bed opposite. And dappled light crossed over everything. Furthering the sensation of being in a forest glade. Especially with the deep green carpeting and the painted clouds that drifted across the ceiling.

Sirius rubbed the side of his face with embarrassment. "Remus did that by the way." He indicated all the stencilling. "He always was a good artist. And Flitwick did the charmwork. Made it extra special since you're his favourite student."

"Professor Flitwick was here?" Holly questioned as she came out of her daze.

“And Dumbledore. They helped with the warding and then restricting Floo access.” His eyes traced over the room. “They and the house-elves helped me clean and fix everything.”

Holly was puzzled. “House-**elves**?”

“From Hogwarts,” he clarified. “Useful little creatures. And so friendly. They get bored during the summer without the students to keep them occupied. They were more than happy to come over and help.” Sirius chuckled. “Dumbledore had so many volunteers that they had come on rotating shifts so that everyone would get a chance to work.”

Holly nodded. She didn’t say anything, simply went back to gazing at her room. A small smile played across her lips.

Sirius just watched her, hand on her shoulder squeezing tight. “I’m glad that you’re here, Holly,” he said in her ear. “Welcome home.”

Lunch later was an interesting affair. Dobby bounced around all over the place, doing his utmost to not throw his arms around her legs again in a demented hug. Sirius seemed to find his behaviour hilarious and did little to stop it. Holly put up with it in good grace, in too happy a mood to be annoyed.

The two of them unpacked her things afterwards, while Dobby cleaned up their meal and went out to tend the garden. Sirius had all but ordered him out there, wanting to spend more time with his goddaughter alone. With magic, it didn’t take them very long. Organising everything lasted a bit longer, especially since they chatted the entire time.

Holly got to hear all about the house and the surrounding property. They were situated on the far outskirts of a Muggle village, which explained the decor, not too far from Godric’s Hollow. Most of the original spellwork had been done by Sirius’ uncle and then later Sirius and his friends. Thankfully, Pettigrew hadn’t helped them, not being trusted with anything more difficult than tying his shoelaces most days. Dumbledore had added warding during the war and then again just before she had arrived.

There obviously wasn't blood protection like she had with Petunia, but they were under *Fidelius* and quite a number of other spells. Sirius was their Secret Keeper at the moment, though he was considering a transfer to either Holly herself or Dumbledore for added protection. The girl suggested Tom since very few people knew of his existence and even fewer of his relation to Voldemort. But Sirius didn't think the spell would work due to his lack of a corporeal form. *Fidelius* didn't work with ghosts or spirits.

The afternoon passed in good cheer, and shortly, they were sitting down to dinner. Remus joined them a little beforehand, coming out of the Floo without a single stumble. Holly greeted him warmly enough. But she kept a hint of distance. This was the first she'd seen the werewolf since just before he had resigned from Hogwarts, and she wasn't exactly pleased that he had left without even a goodbye. However, her coolness mostly evaporated as their meal progressed. Particularly after he apologised, a sheepish expression on his face.

Conversation drifted after that. Yet, soon enough, it went to the topic on every Quidditch fan's mind.

"Excited about the World Cup, Holly?" Remus inquired as he took a sip of water.

She nodded fiercely. "I've been following the playoffs on the Wireless. Bulgaria is definitely going to be in the finals; Krum sounds amazing." The Slytherin paused to set down her fork. "Draco swears Ireland will make it instead."

Golden-brown eyes flickered to her. "You're going with Draco then?"

At the head of the table, Sirius hesitated as those eyes went to him.

"Both Blaise and I. Draco's father got tickets for us," Holly said. "Dante has them, too, but the Malfoys will be in the top box. I think Dante is going to take Belle and Lexie instead. He might have an extra ticket since Eren doesn't want to go; someone needs to stay with the baby, after all."

Remus shifted in his seat. Something flashed across his face, but it was gone in an instant. His forehead and lips tightened.

"I think that Arthur Weasley won the Ministry draw for top box tickets," Sirius inserted unexpectedly. "I could have sworn Dumbledore told me that." He took a bite of his potato.

Remus ignored him. "Are you staying with the Malfoys at the Cup?" the ex-professor questioned, an odd note to his voice.

The other man glanced at him over the table but discreetly shook his head. His hand tensed around his glass, and there was a gleam in his eyes that Holly couldn't quite name. Like a silent and nearly gestureless conversation passing between the two adults that she couldn't completely decipher.

"No," Holly answered instead, missing nothing. "With Dante and Blaise. We'll meet up with Draco and his parents there."

A feeling of almost relief appeared in the air. Remus sat back in his chair, hands resting in his lap. Sirius simply watched him for a minute before focusing on his food.

"Good, good," Remus finally put in. "I'm sure you'll have a great time with them."

Holly gifted him with a strange look but decided to change the subject. "You mentioned that Dumbledore has been over this summer. Has he had any luck finding a new Defence teacher?"

Sirius smirked. "Oh, he has someone in mind. And I do believe that you'll like him Holly. A very devious mind."

"What he means is a paranoid mind," Remus inserted and took another drink of water. "Brilliant but paranoid. Sees evildoers everywhere."

"Well, he was an Auror during not one but several wars. I'd say he saw loads of them," Sirius shot back amicably. He bit into his roast with a flourish.

The werewolf shook his head. "But Alastor now thinks that children and grandmothers are out to get him. Did he ever tell you the story of what he did to the witch who said 'Boo?'"

Sirius waved a hand. "She deserved it. Jumping out at him in a dark alley with a mask on. And the day after that really nasty raid."

Holly could tell that Remus fought not to roll his eyes. She had to stifle her own laugh.

"Three weeks in a Saint Mungo's intensive care ward is rarely deserved, Padfoot." Remus inhaled nosily. "And the mask was green, not white or silver. They were right outside Gringotts in broad daylight."

"In an alley outside Gringotts just before a thunderstorm," Sirius retorted. "He wasn't being paranoid. Merely cautious and watchful of his surroundings."

"Besides," Holly added, "it's not paranoia if they really are out to get you." Her lips twitched.

The Animagus pointed at her with his fork. "That's my girl. She gets it."

Remus lost the battle and rolled his eyes.

The rest of the week passed in a pleasant blur, though it was odd at first. The house itself was pleasant and relaxing, just the sort of thing both Holly and Sirius needed. Still, the two of them were rarely alone. Remus all but lived with them, only leaving every few days. Further, Blaise was over all the time, and Luna and Draco visited twice in the first four days. And it was readily apparent during dinner with the Zabini's that Holly would be staying with her godfather. Eren seemed both relieved and more than a bit sad. She was glad that things were working out but would miss her foster-child nonetheless.

Afterwards, things seemed to speed up even more. August flew by, and the Quidditch World Cup loomed on the horizon. It turned out that Dante did in fact have an extra ticket, doing his utmost to entice Sirius along. The Animagus was initially reluctant, however. He wasn't entirely comfortable with large groups of people, most of who would gape and stare if they figured out who he was. But eventually, Holly

won him over. He wouldn't be staying overnight with them in the tent but would still attend the game, probably under a few Disguising charms.

And soon enough, the day of the Quidditch match arrived. They woke up at the normal time, which was dawn for Holly. Sirius, despite being a lazy dog, was a morning person. And he was always up shortly after his goddaughter. Remus was surprisingly the one who liked to sleep in, and it wasn't unusual for Sirius to have to bodily force him from his bed.

This morning in particular it would have been very difficult to awaken the werewolf, the full moon just the night before. Holly and Sirius just let him sleep since he didn't really need to be up anyway. The pair of them ate a delicious breakfast and were already helping Dobby clean the kitchen, much to his disgust, when Dante arrived. He smiled in greeting.

Sirius seemed rather surprised the man was alone. "Where's everyone else?"

"Eren took the children there already," Dante answered easily. His gaze went to Holly. "Just waiting for you to join them, my dear."

She nodded, adjusting the shrunken bag in her pocket. It contained the few essentials she would be taking with her.

"All right then, ready to go?" Dante questioned. "You'll have to side-long with me. The nearest Floo is a good distance away, which is why Eren and the children had to leave before us."

She turned to her godfather. "Bye, Sirius. We'll see you tonight."

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do." Then, he swept her up in a big hug.

"I solemnly swear," she replied with a smile before glancing at Dante.

The man bid farewell to Sirius and very gently placed a hand on Holly's shoulder. There was the sensation of being squeezed through a tube, and suddenly, there were standing in a field. Morning sunlight poured down on them, and the two blinked at the brightness.

“Holly! Papa!” a childish voice called out. There was the sound of two sets of feet running up to her.

The Slytherin braced herself, already knowing what to expect. And sure enough, she was all but tackled seconds later. She squinted and peered down at two very familiar faces.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Isabella Zabini pronounced with a wide grin, staring up at her idol.

“Me, too,” added her younger sister, Alexandria. Her green eyes were wide with happiness.

Holly felt her lips twitch, but she was prevented from saying anything as Blaise strolled over. With the help of his father, he calmly prised the two from his best friend.

“Easy now,” Dante put in pleasantly. “You just saw her the other day. No need to run her down. And you’ll see her all day today and tomorrow.”

They reluctantly pulled away. “Yes, papa,” they chimed together.

He winked at Eren as she approached. “They’re so excitable.”

“Must get it from you,” she replied, coming over to give Holly her own hug. “I hope you have a good time. And be careful. These things are always so crowded. Be sure to stay together.”

There was a chorus of affirmation from those gathered. Eren studied them for a moment before leaning up to her husband. The couple exchanged a soft kiss.

“Be good.”

“I will, my love,” he assured.

She lifted an eyebrow. “And don’t antagonise the Irish. I know that you’re still sore that they beat Spain, but that’s not the fault of the fans.

Dante had the grace to blush.

With that, Eren waved at them and Apparated away. She did need to return to her youngest, after all, having left him in the care of the house-elves for a few moments.

Her husband stared after her for a long minute before shaking his head. "Everyone, this way."

He led them towards the centre of the field and used his wand to scan over the ground. It took her a second, but Holly soon realised that he was searching for their Portkey. Dante found it quickly and held up the tattered umbrella. He motioned for them to gather around and made certain that the two youngest were on either side of him.

Holly noted that there didn't seem to be anyone else joining them. "Are we the only ones?" she questioned Blaise, who was standing so close that their shoulders bumped.

"I think that only the Avis family are going besides us, and they've been there since Tuesday. None of the other neighbours had tickets as far as I know." He shrugged. "Or they could be leaving from somewhere else."

Holly considered but any response fell away as Dante spoke.

"Ten seconds. Be sure to touch the Portkey."

Holly already had two fingers on it but added another just in case. Blaise chuckled at her, only to do the same.

And then, her world dissolved. Streaks of colour flashed by in the shape of trees and houses. She had the sensation that everything was flying by them at an incredible speed. Of course, just as she was becoming accustomed to the sensation, her feet slammed into the ground. The Slytherin stumbled but subtle use of telekinesis kept her upright. Blaise wasn't so lucky, almost falling to one knee before she also caught him. Dante kept his feet on his own, grabbing hold of his daughters and anchoring them in place.

A light breeze tugged at them as they all steadied themselves and gave a sigh of relief.

“9:15 from Midsomer Meadow. Right on time.”

Hija: daughter

A special thank you to *crimson hearts*, the 500th reviewer.

AN: I apparently lied about when I was going to start 4th year, but I'm in med school now, and that consumes my life like you would not believe. Also, I am trying to revive my other HP series, but we'll see how that goes.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Forty-One: Aegri Somnia

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Forty-One: Aegri Somnia

“9:15 from Midsomer Meadow. Right on time.”

Holly could feel a breeze stir at her skirt as she whirled around. A man in Muggle trousers and a parka stood just behind them and to the side. His partner was a middle-aged witch in a Victorian corset and knee-high, leather boots. Both were grimacing.

“If you wouldn’t mind,” the woman cut in as she waved them over to her, “but we have a group from Oxford coming in ten minutes. Supposed to be at least twenty.”

Dante blinked at her. “Er... could please you tell us where to go? It’s the Zabini party.”

“Zabini,” she checked her parchment, “you’ll need to see a Mr. Roberts.” The witch glanced up. “Well, off with you lot. Just head to the right for about twenty minutes. Should see a stone cottage.” She stepped away without another word.

Dante exchanged a look with his son. “Thank you?” It was said with some hesitancy, and when the woman ignored him, he turned to his children. “Well, this way, loves.”

He very gently took each daughter’s hand and headed off. Blaise and Holly glanced at each other but trailed after him.

It didn’t take long for everything to be sorted out. A quick trip to a very befuddled Muggle man, who had to be Obliviated when an Auror Apparated within view, yielded the destination of their campsite; the walk there was short but pleasant. They passed a myriad of other tents along the way, and it was rather obvious to Holly that the various witches and wizards were either supremely out of touch with the Muggle world or didn’t care. Probably both. Especially after Dante’s comment about showing off.

Their own tent was put up easily enough. All Dante had to do was unfold and pop it into place; the tent did the rest, resembling one of the newer Muggle types Holly had once seen in a magazine. The inside was spacious with easily enough room for all five of them – Dante and his daughters, Blaise, and Holly herself – along with Sirius and Draco if they chose to stay. There was a kitchen and dining area, along with three bedrooms, a bathroom, and a general common room. Apparently, Dante's sister liked to camp in style. At least, that was what Holly surmised based on the fact that this was her tent.

Exploration of everything took most of an hour after all was said and done. Holly and Blaise would share a room, leaving a free bed for Draco. Dante would be with his daughters since they were both young and in an unfamiliar place. The final bedroom would most likely remain empty unless Sirius later claimed it.

Of course, that left them plenty of time to become bored since the match wouldn't even start until after sundown. The two Zabini girls opted to nap, having risen earlier than usual, while Dante set about making lunch. Holly offered to help, but he shooed her off with Blaise. Not having anything else to do, they decided to wander around the campsite, though they were only released after Dante cast a quick Tracking charm on both of them and with a firm reminder to be back by noon.

Holly found it fascinating to see such a variety of people, most of them foreign. Witches and wizards with strange accents and even stranger clothing. A middle-aged woman in a red and white-striped dress. A warlock with green shamrock robes that sang in Gaelic whenever he moved. Even a group of school-aged children in what looked like renaissance period dress. Then, there was the smattering of languages: French, Russian, Chinese, and what suspiciously sounded like Swahili.

And it quickly became obvious that team-spirit was out in full force. An entire section of the campsite was decked out in green as far as the eye could see. Like a patch of Ireland transported over just for the occasion. The Bulgarians, not to be outdone, sported a good three dozen life-size pictures of their Seeker. Complete with duck-footed walk, scowl, and beaky nose. The two Slytherins had to stifle a laugh

at that, noticing his almost unnatural resemblance to their Head of House. Particularly when he was in one of his moods.

Along the way, the pair saw several schoolmates, some of whom they even liked. Titania and her uncle were camped out at the edges of the Irish section, both wearing shamrock pins. The Auror nodded at their passing, his niece waving and calling out a greeting. Seamus Finnegan and his mate Dean Thomas were nearby, accompanied by a gaggle of other Ireland fans. Milli was with her family just a ways away, and they spotted Gavin and Theo interspersed in the group as well. Blaise even saw Fred and George from a distance, but they didn't notice any other Weasleys.

They ran into Sophia and Dimitri Dolohov, two fellow Slytherins, near the Bulgarian contingent and were immediately dragged over to meet their mother. Madam Dolohov was dark-headed like both of her children but warm and quick to stuff them with refreshments, despite their half-hearted protests. Somehow, Blaise and Holly managed to escape a little while later, starting back to their own tent.

They caught sight of Narcissa Malfoy and an unknown witch two sections over but didn't get a chance to speak with her before they lost her in the crowd. And Holly couldn't help but wonder where Draco and his father were, especially since they were supposed to meet up before the match. But she figured that they might stop by later on.

They stepped up to the opening of the tent at twelve o'clock exactly, Dante nodding with approval as he escorted them inside. Sirius was already with Belle and Lexie at the table, entertaining them with a watered-down version of his school exploits. Lunch was tasty, but neither Blaise nor Holly could finish, still full on snacks. Her godfather just laughed as they explained their whirlwind visit with the Dolohov family.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in a pleasant blur. Sirius and Dante spent most of it comparing the merits of the two teams; the former was adamant that Ireland would win, while the latter didn't even want to contemplate such a thing. Holly and Blaise, in turn, spent most of their time with his sisters. The two girls weren't as familiar with Quidditch and had to be coached on the various

positions and players, though they seemed to get the gist of everything. It also helped when Sirius stopped arguing long enough to transfigure some silverware for a demonstration.

Soon enough, it was approaching sunset. Almost time for them to leave.

Naturally, that was when Lucius Malfoy decided to announce his presence. Dante was swift to bring him inside, Draco right at his heels. Holly greeted them both, but she paused when she sensed Sirius stiffening.

Lucius looked beyond her to gaze at her godfather. "Sirius." He nodded his head.

"Lucius," the Animagus replied evenly.

"You are looking well," the blond said with a pleasant tone. "I thank you for this opportunity to escort Miss Potter. I assure you that she will be well kept in my care."

Sirius tilted his head to the side, a sure sign that he was thinking deeply. "Oh. I suspect she will. It wouldn't do for anything unfortunate to happen."

"You have my word," Lucius responded with a half-smile, and there was a tingle of magic to the air following his sentence. A binding on the promise he had just made.

Sirius paused, eyes narrowing for a fraction of a second. Holly could tell that he was trying to figure out what had just happened. But he finally acquiesced.

"Well then." He turned to Holly. "Don't do anything I wouldn't. I'll see you after the match."

Holly smiled at and gave him a wink behind Lucius' back as they turned to leave. "I promise."

It took nearly half an hour to reach the stadium, interrupted as they were by the crowd. Lucius was rather effective in leading them through the throng, subtly using his cane to keep people in check. Their seats were on the very top tier and in the highest row, the best for viewing, but it was only half-full when they reached the box. Fudge was there along with someone she could only assume was the Bulgarian Minister, judging by his accent, not to mention a few of their aides. There was also a lone house-elf in the lowest row, apparently saving the two seats on the end. There was something odd about her, something hovering and lingering in her presence, but Holly dismissed the thought out of hand.

Narcissa, who had saved their place, smiled at their arrival and directed them where to sit. She nudged Blaise into the seat on the very end followed by Holly herself. Draco was next in the spot beside his mother with Lucius on her other side. The girl couldn't help but realise how carefully Narcissa must have planned this. Holly was surrounded on all sides with the two adults in easy reach should something happen. Apparently, they were taking her safety very seriously. A given with her unfortunate moniker.

Of course, just as she was coming to understand this fact, Fudge chose that moment to make introductions. A rather difficult thing with the Bulgarian Minister's supposed ignorance of English. But something about his demeanour told Holly that he was faking, most probably the laughing smirk he wore whenever Fudge tried to explain something to him. Still, that didn't prevent him from winking in Holly's direction when she caught him or the fact that his grin widened when he noticed her scar.

She quickly turned away but not before Draco and Blaise caught on. The two of them snorted at her. Holly sniffed and set about glancing around the stands.

From her spot, she could clearly see the Zabinis and Sirius. The two girls practically vibrated with excitement, and Dante was rocking back and forth in his seat. Her godfather, however, was frowning slightly and looking around. Even from the distance, she could tell that he was bothered by the crowd and the sheer number of people. It didn't help that, despite the notice-me-not charms he insisted on wearing,

some of those around him seemed to be gazing at him with interest. Almost as if they could tell there was something odd about him. Or perhaps they had simply picked up on his behaviour.

“Oh,” Draco interrupted her thoughts. “I almost forgot.” I reached into his pocket and pulled at two shiny metallic objects, which resembled Muggle binoculars. “I brought you something.” He handed them to his friends.

Holly studied hers intently. She had a vague idea what this could be but looked to Draco for confirmation.

“Omnioculars!” Blaise cut in. “Thank you. This will make the match so much better.”

Holly parroted him, “Yes, thanks.”

She was swift to look through, pausing and rewinding the actions of the people just below them. She could make that fat wizard pick his nose over and over again. And watch at double-speed as a witch nearly took a tumble down the stairs.

“Very nice,” the girl concluded after a moment. She gifted Draco with a big smile.

He smiled back and scooted closer to her. “They’ll also show the names of plays as you watch,” he informed her. “I’ll bet that you will pick up quite a number of ideas for Quidditch.”

Blaise made a sound. “So that’s your dastardly plan, is it? Hoping to beat Gryffindor even worse this year?”

Draco cast a glance behind him to see if anyone was watching; they weren’t. He made a motion for Blaise and Holly to lean in.

“There won’t be any Quidditch this year,” he whispered but held up a hand before either could respond. “Not here. I’ll tell you later. Just know that something huge is going on at Hogwarts.”

He leaned back. The other two just goggled at him. Neither could quite comprehend what could stop their school from having Quidditch. It was like cancelling Halloween; nothing sort of Merlin's third return or a foreign invasion could do that. Quidditch had even continued during the war against Voldemort.

Holly puzzled over that for some time, belatedly noticing that the box was filling in around them. Until there was only a line of vacant places on the very bottom.

Draco suddenly nudged her with his elbow, seeing the owners of those seats before she did. And sure enough, what looked like the entire Weasley clan minus their matriarch was making their way to the top box. In their midst were none other than Hermione Granger and Neville Longbottom.

Holly blinked. This was rather unexpected.

But she still found it in herself to return Fred and George's wave, not to mention Neville's verbal hello. She also shook hands with the two oldest Weasley boys when they turned around to introduce themselves, noticing how handsome both of them were and how much of a contrast. Charlie was shorter like the twins with a ready smile and very freckly skin. Bill was tall like Percy, but the fang dangling from his single earring and the dragonhide boots were evidence enough that was where the resemblance ended. The long hair only accentuated that point.

Ron and Hermione gave a simple greeting in passing, though Ginny looked ready to start up a conversation. Thankfully, the twins picked up on this and directed her to sit by them, pulling her away. There was a tense moment when Arthur Weasley realised that he was directly below Lucius, but he took his seat with good grace. Other than that, there didn't seem to be any problems.

And Holly just wondered how on earth he had managed to afford their seats. No offense to the family, but they weren't exactly rolling in money.

“They won the tickets,” Blaise whispered in her ear, picking up on her thoughts.

Draco inclined his head and leaned forward. “The Ministry had an employee lottery for seats. It was the son who won. Or maybe the father.”

“Percy?” Holly asked in a low tone.

“That’s the one,” the blond replied. “I--”

He was interrupted by the arrival of another man, a wizard in what appeared to be some very mis-sized Quidditch robes. The black and yellow fabric was pulled tight against his big belly, but he didn’t seem to know or care. The man – who Blaise murmured was a former Beater named Ludo Bagman – gave a jovial salutation before turning to fiddle with his wand, which he pointed at his throat.

“Sonorus!” Suddenly, his voice filled the stadium. “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome! Welcome to final of the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup!”

Holly belatedly noted that the giant board opposite them was no longer filled with advertisements. Instead, it now read BULGARIA: 0, IRELAND: 0.

Bagman continued, “And now, without further ado, allow me to introduce the Bulgarian National Team Mascot.”

Three seats down, Lucius Malfoy sighed very loudly. “Veela,” he muttered to his wife. “Why is it always Veela?” His eye twitched as over a hundred beautiful women sauntered out onto the field.

Narcissa just patted him on the arm as the women fluttered their silvery-gold hair. “I don’t know, dear.”

Holly would have laughed were the reactions of the others in the stands not funnier. Many wizards and no small amount of witches were on their feet and swaying, seemingly enspelled. Below her, Ron

was doing much the same thing, one foot planted on the box wall. Neville had his fingers in his ears, head bowed to his chest so he couldn't see. Fred and George were in similar straits, while it was obvious that the three other Weasley boys and their father had cast some type of charm on themselves.

Beside her, Draco gazed at the Veela with wide eyes but promptly shook his head like a dog trying to dry itself, hands migrating to cover his head. Blaise barely even gave them a passing glance, and Holly suspected that his resistance might have something to do with their bond. Particularly when she felt the familiar tug on it in spite of all the mental shields she had erected. And the girl couldn't help but notice Lucius holding his wife's hand on her other side, fingers intertwined. Or the fact that he only had eyes for her. He even bent down to capture her lips with a chaste kiss.

The Veela were ushered off the field soon afterwards, much to chagrin and displeasure of the crowd. But that mood changed quickly enough.

"And now, kindly put your wands into the air for the Irish National Team Mascots!"

What looked like a giant comet descended on the stadium before exploding in a shower of green and gold sparkles. The resulting light sped around the area and dropped coins everywhere. Holly just watched as the fans dove for the gold pouring down from the sky, even Ron and Hermione getting into the act. They promptly shoved it into Neville's hands, though he was none too pleased.

Too bad it was fake.

"Leprechauns," Holly said aloud, voice filled with a hint of wonder.

Blaise rolled his eyes. "Bloody Irish," he mumbled to himself, sending a low-powered glare at the sea of green stretched out in front of them. "Still can't believe they beat Spain."

Holly chuckled. "I thought your papa was supposed to be sore about that, not you!"

"Well, Ireland got lucky." He crossed his arms over his chest. "Snitch practically flew up Lynch's nose."

She had to stifle a laugh. "That's not quite how it happened as I recall. We did listen to that game on the Wireless, didn't we? And the Chasers had already run up the score by that point."

Their conversation cut off as Bagman introduced both teams. Bulgaria was first, swooping in with their red robes blazing around them. Their Seeker, Victor Krum, flew like a bird of prey. Elegant until he reached the ground and landed. There, he immediately hunched over.

"He's so handsome," she could hear one of the Minister's aides whisper.

Personally, Holly thought he resembled a hawk, only bigger. A glance at Blaise revealed that he thought much the same.

"And he's still in school," another aide murmured back. "Durmstrang, I think."

But the Slytherin's attention waned as Ireland took the field. Lynch, the Seeker, was nowhere near as good as Krum. Something that was blatantly clear within seconds; at least, it was to Holly. He was still impressive, just not as much as he could be.

The match began in short order, and it was all Holly could do to keep up. The sheer speed was phenomenal. She had never seen anyone move this fast on the pitch. Ireland scored within seconds, and then, they were right back out there with the Quaffle again. Their Chasers all but flew rings around their opponents, scoring twice more within the first two minutes.

In the meantime, Krum and Lynch circled the arena. Ostensibly searching for the Snitch. In reality, they were also maintaining a

careful watch on each other. A fact that was proved when Krum suddenly sped towards the ground, Lynch right on his tail. Krum pulled up at the very last moment, but his counterpart ploughed into the dirt. The game was called to a halt as he was revived, giving Krum a chance to search for the Snitch unhindered.

By this point, Ireland was already ahead by seventy points. Eight goals to Bulgaria's one.

The game went on for another twenty minutes with Ireland gaining more and more of a lead. Until Krum finally dove once more, only this time there was a Snitch in front of him. Lynch followed him but again crashed. Krum, however, pulled away. The Snitch was firmly in his hand.

"What!" Draco, Blaise, and Holly all managed to say at the exact same moment, along with half the crowd.

"B-But Ireland still wins," they heard Neville stutter from below them.

And so they had. The scoreboard proved it. BULGARIA: 160, IRELAND: 170.

Holly could only shake her head. "They were simply too good," she informed her friends. "Krum knew they would lose, and he wanted to do it on his own terms."

"But still..." Blaise began.

"I know," Draco added. "I'd hoped it would last longer than that. At least the night."

He fell silent as the Bulgarian team made their way to the box. Krum was as duck-footed as he looked, all but glaring out at the crowd under his thick brow. His dark eyes travelled over everyone in the box, flitting over Holly and lingering before going on.

The Irish team followed soon after and were presented the cup amongst a great deal of cheering. But Holly didn't really care by this

point. All she could think about was Krum, the Snitch still held tightly in his hand and the flash of regret she'd seen in his mind when their eyes had met.

Sometime later, Narcissa escorted them back to the tent, exchanging pleasantries for a moment before she left. But not before asking if she could call on Sirius at a later date. The Animagus agreed after Holly sent him a mental prod, but the incident was thankfully forgotten as they launched into an excited recitation of the game, which carried over into the following late-night snack session. Draco stayed to spend the night, but Sirius left just before Dante put the girls to bed. Holly knew it was to check on Remus since the full moon was the previous night and the werewolf was undoubtedly feeling the effects. Still, her godfather gave her a big hug and kiss on the forehead, reminding her that he would be over the following afternoon to fetch her from the Zabinis.

The older three lingered for a time at the table with Dante but headed off to bed when Draco started to nod off sitting up. Holly felt that she had just laid down when she opened her eyes to peer out into an unfamiliar room. Everything was fuzzy, faded like an old photo, and it took her less than a second to realise that she was caught in another vision.

“But won't anyone do, master?” a slimy and jittery voice asked.

Holly recognised it as belonging to Peter Pettigrew, and her foggy mind instantly sharpened with hatred.

“I mean,” Pettigrew continued as he hobbled into the light, “there certainly have to be others.” He lingered by a table filled with venomous looking potions and other undesirable brews.

“I won't just take anyone,” a slithery voice replied, undoubtedly Voldemort. “I deserve the best. And nothing but that. Only the girl will do. Isn't that right, my sweet?”

A large but lithe serpent came into view. Her – Holly could just tell that it was a she – tongue flicked back and forth with interest, and she bobbed her head in obvious agreement.

“See. Even Nagini is knows,” Voldemort said with a wicked tone. “After all, she is far more intelligent than you. She knows her place. Be certain you don’t forget yours. Else, she will have to teach you a lesson.”

Nagini reared up then and playfully lurched at Wormtail. Pettigrew jerked back into the table behind him and several of the bottles there. They clinked together ominously, one cracking from the impact and spreading its acidic pink contents on the table.

Voldemort shrieked, “Wormtail, you incompetent fool--”

Holly never heard the rest of the sentence as she woke with a start. A hand was just pulling away from her chest as she all but threw herself into a sitting position.

“Circe, Hols,” Draco gasped as he took an involuntary step backwards.

She was nearly panting. “What? What’s going on?”

In the background, Holly could hear terrified screams and the sounds of hundreds of feet pounding through the grass. She swivelled her head around, noting that Blaise was wake and without a shirt.

“Get dressed,” Draco ordered. “Quickly. We’ve got to get out of here.”

There was no time for niceties as he pulled back her covers and jerked her to her feet. Blaise shoved her clothes from the day before into her arms and then proceeded to pull on his shirt. Holly was wise enough to dress swiftly, not even awake enough to feel embarrassed about the strange scars on her skin. Not that anyone should be able to see them in the dimness.

“What’s going on?” she repeated as she threw on her robes and then shoes.

“Death Eaters,” Blaise supplied. “Or at least, that’s what people are saying.” He was already dressed, just waiting for her.

The girl said nothing else as she slid her glass unto her face and her wand into its holster on her wrist. By then, Draco was dressed also, and the three exited their room into the common area. Dante was just arriving with Belle and Lexie when they approached.

“Good, good. Everyone’s here.” Dante gave them an appraising look before casting a Tracking charm on each of them. “Definitely too many to side-long,” the man decided out loud. “This way then. Stick close. We’re going into the woods until this blows over.” He cast another spell with his wand, a strange orange light connecting him to his youngest children, which he reinforced by taking their hands in his.

Blaise was quick to copy the latter motion, snagging Holly as Draco did the same on her other side.

“If anyone gets separated,” Dante called out as he headed for the tent opening. “Find an adult who looks trustworthy, preferably someone you know. And meet back here when it calms down. If worse comes to worse, I’ve got a charm on all of you. Just don’t cancel it, and I’ll be able to find you.”

With that, he nudged open the tent flap and peeked out. Dozens of people were racing by. Parents were carrying their children or pulling them along behind. Some were calling out, searching for those they had lost. Others were so desperate to escape that they didn’t seem to care, pushing and stampeding without thought.

And Holly could make out what seemed to be a battle in the distance. Spells of all colours were flying everywhere. She even saw a brilliant flash of green light, the Killing curse no doubt. A line of masked people marched through the campsite, blasting anything that got in their way. They were opposed by a variety of individuals, though Holly guessed the majority were security or from the Ministry. Further,

over by the campsite manager's cottage, she could see the forms of four people floating in the air. Two were smaller than the others, probably only children. But that didn't stop the Death Eaters from spinning them around like tops.

Dante took a deep breath before he urged them into the fray. He pulled them along the edges by the tents where it was slower but slightly easier to navigate. They fought not to be separated as they were pushed around on three sides, but after what seemed like an eternity, the group managed to make it to the main thoroughfare. From there, it was a straight shot into the nearby trees.

Their plan, however, ran into a snag.

"Dante!" Kingsley Shacklebolt called as he came running up to them, dodging a family of oriental wizards along the way. "Dante Zabini!" He sidestepped a redheaded witch and her toddler. "You're good with Healing charms, right?"

The other man was taken aback. "Well... yes, but--"

"We need you," the Auror cut in. "We need as many Healers as we can get. The Saint Mungo's staff is already overwhelmed."

Dante just stared at him like he had grown another head. "But the children!" He held on tighter to his daughters.

"There are injured children," Kingsley replied sharply, face drawn and tired. "Some of them very badly. Look, man, I know we can trust you. I can't say the same for some of these people." He grabbed Dante by the arm. "We don't know what they'll do."

"I... But I... I can't," Dante stuttered. "I can't leave them!"

Kingsley opened his mouth again, only to be cut off.

"Go, papa." Belle gazed up at her father. "You heard him. They have kids. Just like us."

Lexie added, "They need you." Her green eyes were impossibly large in the dim light and tear-filled. "Please."

"I don't want anybody to die because you weren't there," Belle finished with a sniffle.

Blaise immediately cut in, "We'll be fine. The three of us can look after them." He pointed to himself and then his friends.

Holly and Draco were quick to agree.

"I... But I..." Dante's gaze flickered from his children to Kingsley and then back again.

"Go, papa," Blaise insisted. "You need to go."

His father hedged for a moment, eyes travelling to the still raging battle behind them. "Fine. Take your sisters." He handed Belle to Blaise, but Lexie grabbed Holly before he could do anything else. "Just let me transfer the spell." With a wave of his wand, the orange connection moved to the two Slytherins, and he stepped back, Kingsley's hand now on his shoulder. "Just... just be safe."

"We will," Holly promised. "We'll look after them and ourselves."

"Keep hold of your wands," Kingsley instructed tightly. At their expressions, he added, "Forget about the ban. We've more important things to worry about tonight." He waited until they had wands in hand.

Dante swallowed hard. "I'll meet you back at the tent. Whatever you do, don't go looking for me. If I'm not back by tomorrow, I'll send a message to Sirius and Eren to come get you. Don't leave on your own." He looked ready to say more, but Kingsley was already tugging him along.

The children just watched him leave. The crowd surged around them as Kingsley pulled him over and then Apparated both of them away. "Eren's going to ring my neck" was the last thing they heard before both disappeared completely.

Blaise let out all his air in a huff and turned to his friends. "Let's go."

Like his father before, he led them along the edge of throng and towards the tree line. The closer they got, the more the crowd dispersed. Until they were walking along easily as they passed underneath the first branches. But they didn't even consider stopping, not with all the people following just behind. The Slytherins and their charges kept going, moving by a group of French-sounding students without pause.

The light faded the further they went, and soon enough, they were forced to use their wands. And it seemed like just after they had, the going got tougher. The ground was filled with roots and all manner of obstacles. After the second time Belle tripped in as many minutes, Blaise bent to pick her up, wrapping her arms and legs around his back. Holly was just about to try her luck with the same for Lexie, but Draco swooped in before she could. The little girl let out a giggle as she hopped onto her cousin's back.

And they continued walking. But it wasn't even five minutes later that they ran into another complication. Literally.

"Ow!" Draco groaned as something came around the other side of a tree and smacked right into him but luckily managed to avoid his living cargo.

"Bugger," another voice moaned from the ground.

"Weasley?" Draco asked, as if he had heard wrong.

But sure enough, there was a redhead idiot in front of him.

"Ron?" someone else inquired. "Ron, what happened?" Then, Hermione stepped into the light cast by their wands; Neville was right behind her.

The redhead staggered back to his feet. "I'm fine."

“How did you not see me?” Draco ignored them. “Morgana, we’ve got lights and everything.”

“Sorry,” Ron bit out. “That’s why I came over. To see who it was.”

Holly, who had been silent thus far, finally spoke. “Well, it’s us. As you can see.”

Ron snorted. “Yeah, got that.” He rubbed furiously at his aching chin, which he had rammed into Draco’s shoulder.

Neville smiled at her. “Everyone in your group okay?”

“Just tired. That’s all,” Blaise answered before searching around. “And yourselves?”

“The same,” Neville replied. “Looking for somewhere to rest.”

Blaise suggested, “I suppose that this is as good a place to stop as any.” The Slytherin wasn’t exactly thrilled by their company. But he was tired, and it was clear the others were, too.

Holly nodded. “It’ll do.” She watched as the Zabini girls slid down from their human ponies.

“Do you know what was going on?” Hermione asked them after a moment. “I mean, back at the camp.”

“A riot of some sort?” Holly suggested offhandedly. “I do know that a lot of people were hurt.” She sat down under a tree and between the two Zabini girls, who cuddled closer.

Blaise inclined his head and leaned back against the same tree. “They asked my papa to help heal, so it must have been bad. He’s not even a trained Healer. Just took some courses on first aid and whatnot.”

“I thought it was Death Eaters,” Neville inserted then. “At least, I could have sworn that I saw the masks.” He shivered, but Holly couldn’t be certain if it was due to the chilly night air.

“How should we know?” Draco asked as he pulled even closer to Lexie.

Ron scowled. “You should know. Your parents are probably the ones out there,” he muttered.

“That’s uncalled for,” Blaise retorted fiercely. “Draco was with us, spending the night. His parents have already gone home.”

The redhead crossed his arms over his chest but kept his opinion to himself when Hermione sent him a look. It was quiet for a few minutes afterward. The group just rested in the semi-light, looking at each other or nothing in particular. The sounds of masses were muted, barely there now. But Holly couldn’t help the shudder of dread that ran through her. Something was about to happen; she just knew it.

“Do you think papa’s okay?” Belle finally ventured.

Holly shifted the smaller girl’s head to rest on her shoulder. “I’m certain. Kingsley – that Auror – wouldn’t let anything happen to him. I’d know. He helped me out last summer.” She briefly considered lowering her shields to search for him but vetoed that idea. She didn’t think she could find Blaise in this mess, much less someone she didn’t know half as well.

“And we go to school with his niece,” Blaise added as he lowered himself to Belle’s level. “They’re both good people. He’ll look out for papa.”

Lexie sniffled. “What about those people? The ones in the sky?” Her voice was impossibly small and frightened.

But it was Neville who responded. “I’m sure they got them down. Ron’s dad and brothers went to help. They’re very good at this sort of

thing.” He grinned at her in the dimness, relieved when she gave a small smile back.

“Mad though to do something like that when the whole Ministry of Magic’s out here tonight,” Hermione murmured to herself. “I mean, how do they expect to get away with it? Do you think they’ve been drinking, or are they just--”

She cut off suddenly at the sound of a twig snapping nearby, just out of sight. Instantly, Blaise and Neville were on their feet. Ron was just behind them, while Holly moved into a crouch just in front of Lexie and Belle. Draco copied her action, pulling Hermione down next to him automatically.

“Hello?” Neville called out, wand now in hand. “Who’s there?”

Their only answer was the sound of footsteps, heavy and staggering like someone had been on a three day bender. Even Holly couldn’t tell who was there, shields still up and probably the only thing stopping the mounting headache she could feel behind her eyes.

“Show yourself,” Neville ordered then.

But whoever it was didn’t listen. They just had time to register a deep and cracked voice.

“MORSMORDRE!”

A spell.

And a huge green thing erupted into the sky. But it was barely discernible through the branches above them. Holly could only see what looked to be a serpent wrapped around something else.

There was a beat...

Then, the woods around them were filled with screams. Followed by dozens of pops as at least twenty people magically appeared on the spot, wands out.

“Get down!” Blaise shouted as he shoved Ron to the ground. And just in time as a red spell flew overhead.

Holly’s first reaction was to cast a shield over herself and her charges, which was only reinforced by the one Draco made. Hermione was crouched in next to them, but Holly couldn’t figure out why she wasn’t casting. Neville, in the meantime, had thrown himself down to avoid a nasty looking orange-yellow light that flew his way. It impacted a tree to the right of them, which promptly burst into flame.

But at least with the sudden light, they could now see their attackers. Of course, that meant their attackers could also see them.

“Stop! STOP!” A man called out, “That’s my son!”

Instantly, everyone froze.

“Mr. Weasley?” Holly questioned as she saw him step closer.

“Ron... Neville... Hermione... are you...” he began but faltered as he took in the additional children. “Who’s that with you?”

Neville scrambled to his feet. “Holly and her friends. And Blaise’s sisters.”

Arthur goggled at them, but he was interrupted before he could say anything.

“Out of the way, Arthur,” another man inserted with a cold voice; Holly vaguely recognised him as a Ministry employee. “Which of you did it? Which of you conjured the Dark Mark?”

“We didn’t do it,” Holly shot back. “We didn’t do anything!” She pulled Lexie and Belle closer to her; both were shivering violently.

“Why did you attack us?” Blaise demanded in front of her. “You could’ve hit my sisters! They’re not even school-age.” Holly felt a flare of pure anger through their link.

“Don’t lie, girl!” The Ministry man’s eyes flickered from her to Draco then. “We know it was one of you.”

“Barty,” another voice jump in, this one female. “They’re only kids. And scared ones at that,” she added at the sight of Blaise’s sisters. “They’d never have been able to--”

Arthur Weasley cut her off, “Where did the Mark come from?”

All of them immediately pointed to the left, towards the trees. The adults whirled that direction, wands at attention.

“There,” Holly answered. “We heard someone moving around, but we couldn’t see who it was.” Her eyes narrowed as the witch from before chose to approach them instead, holding her wand-free hands out in a show of good faith.

“There was someone behind the trees,” Hermione went on shakily. “They shouted something. Like an incantation.”

“Oh, stood over there, did they?” the wizard – Barty – asked with a nasty tone. “Said an incantation, did they? You seem very well informed about how that Mark is summoned, missy--”

The same witch sent him a glare as she turned her head. “Bartemius Crouch, do shut up!” She turned back around and continued to approach. “Are any of you injured?”

They shook their heads and watched as the Ministry workers entered the woods where they had pointed. Holly doubted they would find anyone since the culprit had likely fled, but they might discover clues to his identity. Nevertheless, she was proven wrong as Amos Diggory stepped out of the trees. He was dragging someone with him. A short someone with round-eyes and pointed ears.

A house-elf.

“Winky!” Hermione whispered to them. “It’s Winky. The house-elf from the Quidditch match. But we saw her run through the woods ages ago. It couldn’t have been her though.”

Holly was inclined to agree. Unless Winky was a master ventriloquist in her spare time.

Crouch was of a like mind. He stomped off into the woods to search himself. It probably didn’t help that the house-elf was his, a fact Amos Diggory was quick to point out. Nor did it help that she had a wand. Hermione’s wand.

Caught in the moment, Diggory made the accusation. But it was quickly rebuffed.

“Think of who you’re talking to,” Arthur berated him. “Is a Muggleborn likely to know how to cast the Dark Mark? Much less actually do it?”

Diggory was chagrined and mumbled an apology.

The night was pretty much a bust after that. Not that it wasn’t before.

Crouch grabbed his house-elf by the neck and took off, already in the midst of dismissing her. Arthur Weasley ushered the children out of the woods, dodging a number of concerned citizens as they made their way back to his tent. The inside of it was already full by the time they arrived and swiftly became cramped. Thankfully, Ron’s oldest brothers volunteered to take Holly and the others back to their own tent and to stay with them until Dante returned. And while it was clear that the Slytherins didn’t need a babysitter, much less two, they were too tired to argue by this point. They just tromped back in weary silence.

It was a staggering Dante who returned an hour before dawn. He looked exhausted, nearly dead on his feet, but he still remembered to thank Bill and Charlie for staying. Of course, that was only after he checked on the children himself. Finding that Belle and Lexie were curled together on the sofa, dead to the world in spite of the

excitement of before. The two adults and the Slytherins were at the table, all wide awake.

Soon after, their guests were gone. Dante sent the Slytherins off to bed, but they simply lay in the dark, staring up at the ceiling. Too much had happened. Too much to remember. The riot. The Dark Mark. The caster. Winky. All puzzle pieces that didn't fit together.

Holly didn't get any more sleep that night, and she had the feeling that most everyone else didn't either.

Aegri Somnia: A Sick Man's Dreams

AN: Lucius Malfoy might be a rich bastard, but he does love his wife. For all its idiosyncrasies, Deathly Hallows did seem to suggest this.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Forty-Two: Que Sera, Sera

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Forty-Two: Que Sera, Sera

They left a little before nine, after Dante had woken from his much needed nap. But Holly still felt that perhaps those three hours waiting for him were the longest of her entire life. The tent was packed within seconds, and silence reigned as they used the Portkey that Kingsley had created for them personally and then again during the short walk back to the Zabini's manor. The only sounds were the yawns of the youngest children and the soft swish of their shoes over the summer grasses.

Eren rushed out to meet them before they could even get to the door, a baby on her hip. Sirius was surprisingly all of two steps behind her and nearly ran into the woman when she came to a sudden stop in front of her family. Dante very neatly scooped his son up as Eren threw her arms around first her daughters and then her husband. Sirius went to Holly in the meantime. His face was a wide open book, eyes glittering with obvious relief. And he bent to hug her, only to be shoved out of the way by Eren.

“Hey!”

She ignored him. “Oh, you’re safe.” Eren pulled both her oldest son and Holly against her.

They collided, and it was all they could do to keep their heads from doing the same thing. Draco started to laugh beside them. However, that was only until Eren latched onto him, too. The blond’s face met Blaise’s shoulder with a solid thud, but at his groan of pain, the woman finally let them go.

“I was so worried,” Eren said in a choked voice. “When Sirius told me what had happened, I imagined the worst. And the Ministry wasn’t letting anyone in or out.” She covered her mouth with a shaking hand, eyes welling with tears. “All I could think of was that Death Eaters would go after Holly.”

Dante quickly handed Xavier to his other son and took his wife in his arms. "We're perfectly fine, my love. I doubt they even knew Holly was there." He wisely refrained from mentioning the incident in the woods; there would be time to tell her later when she had calmed down. "Everyone made it out just fine." He began to lead her back towards their house.

Sirius easily slipped his arm around Holly's shoulder as they followed. "And you, pup?" He gave her a squeeze.

"I'm fine. Just tired." She sighed and glanced up at him. "Not that I'm unhappy to see you, but what are you doing here, Sirius?"

The Animagus rubbed his free hand over his face, and Holly thought that he had to be as exhausted as her. "I got a firecall from Flitwick last night. This morning. Whichever." He shook his head. "He was at the match and heard about the riot. He knew you'd been there too and wanted to make sure everyone had made it back. So I Flooded Eren, but she didn't know anything either. Both of us were in a state, and Remus is still potioned up to his eyeballs, the poor bastard. So I just came over to wait it out. I figured you'd come back here first anyway." Sirius shrugged.

"I imagine that everything's crazy right now," Holly commented without any argument. "You should probably go call your parents, Draco."

"Yes, go do that now please," Dante added as he led them all into the kitchen. "Narcissa must be having a fit." He paused and seemed to think for a moment. "Actually, Draco, it's probably best if I took you on home."

Draco sighed and sent Holly a look, but he still went to the fireplace. Blaise's father moved to follow but only after depositing his wife into a seat at the table and asking a house-elf to make some very strong tea. The elf smartly slipped Firewhiskey into the cup for good measure, receiving Dante's nod of approval.

“You know, I can do this by myself,” the blond informed Dante as he pulled the Floo pot from the mantle.

“Undoubtedly, but your parents are liable to wring my neck if I don’t come with you after what happened.” The man exhaled tiredly and placed a hand on the blond’s shoulder. “Come on, my boy. No time like the present.”

Draco frowned but didn’t disagree. “Bye, Holly. Blaise. Sirius.” He nodded at all three of them and then turned back to Dante. “Thank you for letting my stay over. And you too, Aunt Eren.” He waved goodbye to his cousins, who just blinked at him sleepily.

“Anytime, Draco,” Blaise’s father replied. “Though I dare say that next time things will be a bit quieter.”

“Not to mention safer,” Blaise mumbled an undertone, shifting his little brother in his arms.

Eren sniffled beside him. She again looked on the verge of tears, but Lexie chose that moment to crawl into her lap. A house-elf discreetly snuck a teacup onto the table in front of them, and Bella handed it to her mother. Eren drank without a second thought.

Dante and Draco used that distraction to make their escape, disappearing in a whirl of green fire. The Zabini patriarch didn’t return for nearly an hour, looking even more wearied than before. Undoubtedly, he had spent that time doing the same thing Blaise and Holly had. Relating their story of the disaster at the World Cup. But at least, Sirius and Eren were a good audience. Nodding and gasping in all the right places. The Animagus actually broke a cup when he heard about what had happened to the Muggles present and then again at the part where they were nearly cursed by the Ministry workers. And Eren herself seemed torn between pride for her husband’s actions and the urge to throttle him for leaving the children alone. In the end, she settled for merely laying her head on his shoulder as he sank into the chair beside her and twined their hands together.

Everyone just sat there in the kitchen for what seemed like hours, too tired to do much of anything else. Sirius and Holly even stayed for lunch, though it was a half-hearted attempt at best. No one was really all that hungry. Except for perhaps Xavier, but even he seemed subdued. He just leaned back in his brother's arms, blue eyes blinking slowly as though in confusion.

And when Holly made it home just after sunset, she collapsed into her bed and slept straight through until dawn.

The next few days before school started were abuzz with rumours. Holly heard them everywhere. Over the Wireless. The Nyx Herald and Hogsmeade Times, alternatives to the Dailey Prophet, though the story was in there as well. When Sirius took them to the Three Broomsticks for dinner. At the vampire-run green grocers she visited with Luna and her father. Literally everywhere. The attack at the World Cup was all that magical Britain talked about.

The Ministry was in an uproar, theories and accusations flying. It was the Auror's fault. It was the Muggle's. Others blamed it on all the foreigners present, thought that died a quick death after the fierce upswing of international outrage. Some said it hadn't even been Death Eaters but only impersonators; after all, no one liked to think that any of Voldemort's true followers were out and about. Liked to think about how badly their government and indeed themselves had failed during the last war. To allow the guilty to go free while people like Sirius Black – who was now held in a sort of fearful awe – rotted in Azkaban.

And through it all, Tom Riddle, diary-bound wizard extraordinaire, brooded. This wasn't an unusual behaviour in and of itself since he often had bouts of anguish about his circumstances, but this time, things were different. Voldemort was on the move with a servant in his grasp and twisted plans in his mind. Tom could already sense a current of unease in the air, soft whisperings of horror on the horizon. And he knew that both Holly and Luna did, too. They could all feel it in their very bones, the ache and tremble of their souls.

Something terrible was coming. And it was his fault. His stupidity. He had doomed them all.

Or at least, that's what he thought, and no amount of words to the contrary could persuade him otherwise. Tom was unmovable, a mountain that refused to be worn down by the wind. And there was more than enough cause for worry. Tom spent hours in Sirius' library, refusing all contact or to even say what he was researching. He even went so far as to request books from the Black main house, much to the Animagus' utter bewilderment. But Holly's godfather still did as he was asked, taking Tom over to his old family home and letting him remove whatever he wished without question.

Holly was concerned but helpless. Luna, outwardly calm though anxious underneath. Draco and Blaise were silent and conflicted. Sirius, aware but confused, still unknowing of Tom's true identity. Remus was much the same, but he had his own problems to deal with. And days went by without explanation or any sort of answer.

The morning Holly was to return to Hogwarts dawned rainy and cold. A perfect complement to the week of distrust and fear that the magical community was experiencing. Not to mention the unexpected prickle of dread that continuously inched down the Slytherin's back as she dressed. Holly floated her trunk downstairs a little while later, grateful that she had removed the tracers on her wand and doubly grateful that Sirius knew and approved. Her godfather was nowhere in sight when she entered the kitchen, and he was gone throughout breakfast, which she quietly shared with Remus. The ex-teacher barely picked at his own meal, listless and lost in thought.

Finally, however, Holly rose and checked her watch. "Where's Sirius? It's almost time to go?" She absentmindedly reached for her trunk, but Remus beat her to it.

"A firecall with Saint Mungo's," the werewolf explained with a vaguely pained look. "I believe he's filing a complaint. "I wouldn't recommend asking him about how his sessions with the Mind Healer are going," Remus added as he shrunk Holly's trunk for her and handed it back.

Holly blinked. She was becoming rather used to Sirius all but verbally eviscerating people through the Floo. Her ears were still ringing over the lashing he'd given the Auror office only weeks before. It had been a cold complaint, one filled with measured words and a frightening sort of calm. Not a hot and burning rage but a frosty one. The type that was all that much more terrible for the fact that it was so seemingly atypical for him. Sirius could at times be like an energetic puppy, bright and cheerfully sarcastic and playful. But he could also be as cruelly vicious as a dog defending his master when someone he loved was threatened. Perhaps it was the Black in him, but Holly could see why he'd survived both the war against Voldemort and Azkaban.

Still, they'd deserved it.

"Why not?" she asked as her mind drifted back to what Remus had said. She took a moment to stow her luggage in her pocket and gift him with a soft smile.

"Because she keeps wanting me to talk about my mother," Sirius stated as he breezed into the room. There was a firm grimace fixed onto his handsome face.

"I thought you hated your mum," Holly responded carefully and with a look in the man's direction.

The Animagus sniffed. "With the fire of a thousand suns. And apparently, that's the problem. Not the fact that she was a spiteful, old hag. Who didn't love me at all and lived only to berate me and my choices." He tilted his head to the side and crossed his arms over his chest, scowling fiercely.

The Slytherin felt her eyes widen. "That sounds a bit..." She struggled to come up with a word.

"Stupid. Idiotic. Crazy." Sirius' bluish-grey eyes flickered back to her. "I thought so. Especially since I'm paying top Galleon for this supposedly revolutionary treatment. I'll show her revolutionary!"

Remus snorted. "Oh, I'm certain you will." He seemed more amused than he was minutes before, a good sign.

Her godfather shot his best friend a look but allowed the comment to slide. Instead, he uncrossed his arms and approached Holly.

"Read to go, little serpent."

She just shook her head. "Sure. But what happened to 'pup?' And if I'm little serpent, that makes you little dog and him little wolf." The girl jerked her hand in Remus' direction.

"More like big dog and big wolf," Sirius put in as he walked closer. "The big bad wolf."

"Is he going to huff and puff and blow my house down?" she questioned with a sardonic smile, but at Sirius' hesitation, she sighed. "Never mind. It's a Muggle story."

Remus actually laughed beside them. "You'll have to tell it to him some time, Holly. I'm certain he'll like the rest of the Grimm fairy tales, too."

"Grim, you say?" the other man asked with a raised eyebrow. "Oh, I like them."

"That's Grimm with two m's, Mr. Black," Holly corrected. "And they're storytellers. Wrote all sorts for children. You know, the very best kind." She shot Remus a wink. "Ones filled with violence and bloodshed."

"Can't argue with that now." Sirius smiled. "Say goodbye to Remus and let us be off. Don't want to miss the train."

"Not like I haven't done that before," she muttered to herself but still did as she was told.

Holly quickly embraced the werewolf, receiving a kiss on the forehead for her efforts, before returning to her godfather's side. Sirius wrapped her in his own hug, his version of a sidelong Apparition. The world shifted, and the girl felt like she was being squeezed through a tight tube. It went on for several seconds before abruptly ending, and they were standing on the platform. Students and parents milled by in front of them, but Sirius had wisely transported them to one of the far corners, away from both the train and flow of traffic. The Slytherin couldn't help but be impressed by his skill and accuracy. A few centimetres closer, and one of them would have ended up in a wall. Additionally, he had even put her the furthest away from people and out of the direct line of fire.

A very nice bit of magic all in all.

Holly relaxed into his embrace a few milliseconds after their arrival, just enjoying her last few moments with her guardian. It would be so very strange without him at Hogwarts this year; she'd grown that used to him being around. There were always letters, however, and the enchanted mirror he had given her that had once belonged to her father. But they weren't the same. Sirius wouldn't be there with her.

He obviously felt the same way, holding on that much tighter. "I... I love you, Holly," he breathed in her ear. "Don't do anything I wouldn't."

And the moment was broken as she pulled back.

"But where would I ever find a man willing to wear a chicken suit and stilettos?" the girl inquired with an innocent expression.

Sirius blinked but was quick to catch on. "Try, Moony. I bet he would if he were drunk enough. You should ask him about an incident involving Lilac Fawcett, a pink dress robe, and bunny slippers. He just loves retelling that one." He gave her one last squeeze and a gentle push towards the train. "I'll be disappointed if I don't have at least three owls from McGonagall by the weekend," he called after her.

Holly just waved at him. She boarded the train and found her friends with little effort. Someone had had the sense to magically expand

their compartment so that everyone in their group of friends could fit with room to spare, and she eased herself down next to Luna and across from Theo. Regardless, the girl had to fight the urge to blush as he grinned at her, clearly remembering an incident at the very end of the previous school year. After all, it wasn't every day that she received a love confession from one of her closest friends, much less on the train ride home and only days after she had cleared her wrongfully imprisoned godfather. The memory alone of the gleam in his eyes and the kiss to her cheek were enough to make her skin heat up. Especially when she recalled the apology for springing this on her and his urge to "think about it."

Nevertheless, Theo did nothing but smile in her direction, face betraying nothing. Even as Holly struggled to control the flush spreading across her face. That, of course, prompted Luna to ask if she was feeling ill and for Pansy to check Holly's forehead. Theo's lips twitched but remained mercifully closed.

Just as Pansy was all set to drag her off in search of a prefect, Blaise entered the compartment. He successfully prised the blonde off of his best friend in record time and pulled her down between him and Luna, who just gave Holly a dreamy look. One that was belied by the flare of absolute amusement coming off of her in waves. Blaise gave Theo an odd glance as he settled. Not that Holly was surprised. Particularly since she'd told him about the other boy's confession.

The rain beat down hard as the train pulled away from the station, falling so fast that it was a blur on the other side of the window. Holly sighed as the countryside sped by before flickering her attention to the rest of the compartments occupants. Gavin and Cynthia were in the process of pulling out a chessboard, while Luna had buried herself behind her copy of the Quibbler. Holly watched as Blaise pulled a book from his pocket, even as Pansy, Autumn, and Draco were soon lost in a game of Exploding Snap. Theo produced a stack of Chocolate Frog Cards, Greg and Vince seeming eager to trade. Daphne looked half-asleep and would probably be all the way there soon. And Milli... Milli was staring at her.

"What?" Holly asked.

Milli's eyes narrowed. "Okay, confess now," the heavy-set girl ordered. "What big secret have you got that you can't tell us for months at a time for no reason other than you don't feel like it?"

Everyone turned to stare at them.

"Er... none actually," Holly admitted. "I mean, you already know about the dreams I've had about Voldemort, so there's nothing else to tell." She had to fight not fidget under such intense scrutiny.

"Nothing?" Gavin repeated, still in the process of putting all the chess pieces on the board. "An escaped prisoner you're hiding? A secret diary that talks back? A special ability of some sort?"

"No, no, and no." Holly shrugged. "I have nothing at all."

"How utterly boring," Luna inserted with a dejected pout and went back to her magazine.

Draco smirked over his cards. "Well, except for the fact that the Triwizard Tournament is being held at Hogwarts."

Well, that certainly got their attention.

"What?"

"Oh, didn't you know?" he returned loftily.

Pansy crossed her arms over her chest. "Well, not all of us have fathers who stalk the Minister."

"My father does not stalk the Minister." Draco shot her a baleful look. "They are simply friends." He shuffled the cards in his hand.

Milli snorted. "Nobody's friends with Fudge. That man is a moron."

"So are Greg and Vince, but we all seem to like them well enough," Draco pointed out.

“Hey!” the two offended boys said in perfectly Weasley twin unison. “We resemble that remark.”

There was a pause as the others blinked.

“Back to the tournament,” Blaise redirected after a moment, book temporarily set aside.

Draco shook his head and gave a quick summary. It sounded stupid and dangerous. Not to mention deadly. Holly honestly couldn’t see why anyone would ever want to enter. No matter how much they paid her. It was a bit like those foolish Muggle game shows, only with death as one of the options. Further evidence that human stupidity was universal. The girl was even more unimpressed when she learned that there would be no Quidditch. None whatsoever. Positively scandalous.

“No Quidditch? They’ll have a mutiny on their hands.” Milli was unequally unhappy.

Pansy scowled at Draco and demanded, “Why didn’t you tell any of this before?”

“I didn’t know about it until the day of the World Cup, and I was rather distracted afterwards. Sorry.” He gave a dismissive wave. “I’m telling you now though. At least, you won’t be surprised when it is announced later on.”

“I suppose we can give you that,” Theo acknowledged after several heartbeats. “But why now? I mean, why hold the tournament now? They haven’t had it for at least a century. It’s supposed to be too dangerous. My dad once told me that the contestants had the tendency to die and rather horribly at that.”

“Perhaps Dumbledore or the Ministry is trying to build closer international ties,” Luna inserted from behind her magazine. “Britain could certainly use the good publicity. Europe as a whole is seen as rather backwards in comparison with say the States or Japan.

They're strictly meritocracies and have none of this blood status rubbish."

"They're also supposed to be in a lot closer contact with Muggles," Gavin added as he took Cynthia's bishop. "Rather ironic really. Their ways aren't so much revolutionary as a reversal to older times. When magic was practiced much more freely and we regularly and openly interacted with Muggles." He crinkled his nose. "Did you know that in the States Muggles in on the secret can even hold office in their government?" At their headshakes, he went on, "Well, they can. So can vampires and Veela and pretty much every sapient being. The only things they have a restriction on are Dementors. Won't even allow them into the country."

"How do you know so much about this?" Autumn questioned with a tilt of her head.

"Visited the States a few times. My mum's parents retired to the southern part, and we used to go see them before they were killed during a hurricane." He watched as Cynthia captured his knight. "It was so odd going there. In the magical parts, you could see kids freely practicing magic, and nobody bothered them for it. And abusing a house-elf is a felony; they can even leave their masters at will and find another family to bond with."

"What if they can't find anyone? Won't they die? That's what my aunt always told me," Daphne said with more than a hint of interest.

Gavin frowned. "They have a system set up for adopting them out to people. Really very fascinating. Based on the one the Greeks used to use in ancient times."

"Are other countries the same way?" Draco questioned. "Though obviously not Europe from what I remember." He shuddered at the thought of visiting Romania when he was eight.

"Well, Japan is. Their government was reformed after World War II." The dark-skinned boy lifted his chin up as he thought. "Australia is as well. They're supposed to be similar to what Britain was centuries ago,

but they never backslid like we did. Canada, too. Most of the South American countries are stable magically, though not so much on the Muggle side.”

“And Mind Magic?” Holly inquired with false casualness. “What about that?”

“Treated like every other type of magic.” Gavin gazed at her steadily. “As long as someone doesn’t use it to harm others, it is perfectly acceptable.”

“If only it was like that here,” Pansy muttered. “Even Hogwarts could use some of that attitude.” She lifted her eyebrows as they all glanced at her. “Don’t get me wrong. Hogwarts is a great school, but they just don’t have the funding they used to. In the fifties, when my parents went here, they had over a dozen electives. They did,” the girl insisted at their incredulous looks. “Art, foreign languages, enchanting, healing, duelling. Those sorts of things. Of course, they also had a lot more students back then. Over double for each year.”

Gavin, the Ravenclaw that he was, was completely affronted. “Why don’t we have any of that?”

The blonde girl exhaled. “Nobody wants to pay for that stuff anymore. And quite frankly, a lot of the big donators were killed off during the most recent war or the one before. People like the McKinnons and Whites. The Barnabys. The Troys. Dozens of families. Most of them supporters of Dumbledore. Many of them rich, old families that also supported the true Old Ways.”

“They might as well have painted a target on their backs for the last two then,” Theo inserted with a serious tone.

“The very same ones who wouldn’t have ever let so many Death Eaters bribe their way out of Azkaban,” Holly realised, understanding that the Potter family had very nearly made Pansy’s list. She was, after all, the very last one.

Autumn whispered, "But they were all killed. All of them. Even the children." She put her hand over her mouth.

"And not just them. Muggleborns, too," Blaise put in. "I overheard Flitwick say that almost half of the Muggleborn students in Hogwarts during the last war were either killed themselves or their families were. Several hundred people right there, and that's not even counting all the adult Muggleborns who were murdered or fled the country. Not that the continent was much safer." He had a tired cast to his face. "My papa told me that Beauxbatons had a lot of attrition, too. His sister lost nearly a quarter of her class, and that was after she was transferred out of Hogwarts."

"Well, no wonder the population of Hogwarts has gone down. None of them went on to have kids of their own here." Milli shook her head with suspiciously watery eyes. "Or anywhere. So many people. Dead."

They were silent for several very long minutes after that. But slowly, everyone returned to their previous activities. Holly, for her part, simply stared out the window and thought. She barely even noticed when the trolley passed until Blaise nudged her, and she apathetically ate her Chocolate Frogs. The others were equally subdued, but that gradually went away as the trip progressed. By the time they arrived at Hogwarts, most of them were actually in high spirits. Excited to be back. Even Holly's earlier mood was forgotten as they raced across the muddy path to the carriages.

They were soaked by the time they were inside and on the way to the castle, but Holly was quick to dry herself with her hand and cast an Impervious charm, wishing she had thought to do so earlier. The three other people in her carriage – Blaise, Milli, and Daphne – were quick to follow her lead. That kept them all relatively dry and warm as they exited and waded through the crowd up to the school. Along the way, they saw Peeves pelting several Gryffindors and several other students with water balloons, and McGonagall almost broke her neck sliding down the stairs when she went to chastise him. They also saw the first-years, who were all wet and huddled together, coming in from the lake entrance; Holly vaguely remembered that both Autumn and

Gavin had brothers in this year. She didn't catch sight of either of them, not that she'd ever met Autumn's sibling, as they entered the Great Hall. Still, she figured that she get to see them both soon enough.

Slytherin table was like a godsend as they approached, shifting in next to the part of the Quidditch team and a couple prefects. Everyone around them was in the process of drying themselves magically, though a large number had possessed enough sense to do as Holly had done. Among those number were her year-mates and Luna, who squeezed in with their House instead of her own. It wasn't like Ravenclaw would actually notice she was gone.

Holly took the time to scan the faculty table as the rest of the student body filled in. She immediately noted that the normal Defence seat was vacant, the very same one Remus had occupied only months ago. But the girl wasn't particularly concerned, thinking that Moody was either too paranoid to eat with the rest of them or was off performing a task for Dumbledore.

"Hey," Theo nudged her from across the table. "There's no Defence teacher."

Milli flicked her head to nonchalantly scan around. "No, there's not. Do you have any idea who it is supposed to be this year?"

Holly smirked and beckoned them to lean in. "A former Auror, Alastor Moody."

"Moody? Moody..." Pansy tried to recall. "Where have I heard that name before?"

"Moody?" Titania Shacklebolt, who was listening in, repeated from Luna's other side. "Mad-Eye Moody? Isn't he supposed to have personally defeated dozens of the Dark Lord's servants?"

"That crazy bloke!" Draco's eyes were incredibly wide. "He once tried to hex my father in front of me after they bumped into each other."

Blaise tapped his finger on the tabletop. "That's the one."

Holly half-smiled. "Sirius told me that Moody was one of his instructors at the Auror Academy. Said that he learned more from Moody in a week than in seven years of Defence class."

"Wicked," Sophia Dolohov said with obvious enthusiasm, joining in their conversation. "We should learn a lot from him then. Perhaps he'll even survive the curse on the position."

"He'll have to be made of some pretty stern stuff for that," Theo decided as he watched the rest of their Housemates find a seat. "I mean, we are zero for three so far."

"Terrible odds," Luna went on in a sleepy voice. "Especially when considering what happened to the last few professors. One is dead. A second had his memory erased. And the last was almost attacked by about a hundred Dementors."

"Not to mention a couple of angry parents when they found out that he was a werewolf," Holly inserted with narrowed green eyes. "Did I not tell you about that earlier?" Most of her year-mates nodded slowly, but at the shrugs of Titania and Sophia, she continued, "It was when the three of us – Sirius, Remus, and me – went to buy my school supplies. Remus wandered off to look at something. Books, I think." Holly shook her head. "And by the time Sirius and I found him, a crowd of people at cornered him in one of the side alleys. Apparently, he'd been thrown out of a store and some of the customers chased them there. They were calling him all sorts of terrible things and telling him that he should kill himself to keep decent people safe. One witch even threw a rock at him." She stopped to work her jaw to keep her temper in check. And she felt Blaise take her hand underneath the table.

"Sirius chased them off with the help of one of the shopkeepers, but an Auror walked by and didn't even do anything beside tell them to keep the noise down. It was horrible." Her fingers were squeezed harder. "Remus wouldn't go out with us after that, and Sirius refuses

to go back to Diagon. We didn't even buy all my things. Had to order most of it."

The Slytherin still remembered the incident with a spark of fierce anger, unable to believe the depravity of some people. Nevertheless, it had served to erase any lingering resentment Holly had over the werewolf's abrupt departure at the end of term. She now completely understood why he had packed up and left before dawn; it was certainly better than being run out of the castle by a mob or anything along those lines.

"The nerve of some people," Sophia spat. "Professor Lupin was a great teacher and a good person. He even helped me with my Transfiguration homework several times."

Whatever Holly would have responded with was cut off as McGonagall entered with the first-years trailing behind her. They all looked incredibly small, hunched over as they were, and the girl couldn't help but notice that no one had bothered to dry them off. The deputy headmistress either didn't realise or care as she marched up to the stool after the hat's song and reached in her robes to pull out the roster.

Holly had no idea who the first few students were, but there was another Creevey brother, this one soaked to the bone and covered by Hagrid's enormous coat. Followed by a girl whose name McGonagall mispronounced. And then...

"Darklighter, Adair."

He looked so much like a younger version of his brother that they could have almost passed for twins. Save perhaps the golden-framed glasses perched on Adair's nose and his light brown eyes in place of Gavin's grey. Then, of course, there was the fact that he was sorted into Gryffindor.

Holly cheered anyway. So did her friends.

McGonagall continued down the list. Again, Holly didn't recognise any of the names. The only thing that really caught her attention was when they joined Slytherin, the older students thankfully drying them off. But then, it was time for Autumn's brother to be sorted.

"Summers, Indian." And a fairly tall boy with strawberry blond hair walked up to the Sorting Hat.

"Indian?" Milli repeated. "Your parents named your brother Indian Summers. And I thought I had it bad." She let out a gust of air. "I mean, Millicent is bad enough. But Indian? What were they thinking?"

Autumn shook her head but was easily distracted from a response when her brother was sorted into Hufflepuff.

"Obviously, they weren't," Daphne said in an aside. "Still, it could be worse."

"How?" Draco questioned. "How could it possibly be worse?"

Pansy snickered. "He could have your name."

"I don't know," Cynthia quickly put in, beating him to a retort. "Draco Summers does have a certain ring to it."

"Oh, ha ha." Draco crossed his arms over his chest in a gesture reminiscent of Sirius when he was pouting, but the blond perked up seconds later when the food appeared at their table.

Everyone tucked in with a flourish. The food was as always excellent, but it didn't quite compare with the meals Dobby had made for her during the summer. Holly supposed that had something to do with the fact that they were tailored to Sirius' and her preferences, though Remus' favourites routinely made their way onto the kitchen table. Still, the Slytherin wasn't to be deterred, helping herself some roast and pasta followed by the pheasant Titania insisted she should try. Dessert involved some excellent treacle tart with some type of tropical fruit pudding.

There seemed to an argument going on at the Gryffindor table across the hall, loud enough to attract the Slytherins' attention. Holly though couldn't bring herself to care when she saw that it involved Ron and Hermione; Neville was a safe distance away, seated between a first-year and Fred Weasley. But all the Serpents could make out were the words "slave labour." That lifted a few eyebrows.

Dinner was over in short order, and Dumbledore rose to make his normal announcements. He was on the verge of publicising the Triwizard Tournament when Mad-Eye Moody made his grand entrance, complete with lightening flash in the background; Holly just wondered if he'd timed it that way. The grizzled ex-Auror limped his way to the faculty table, scarred face eliciting gasps from the students as he passed. He thumped to his seat and lowered himself down just as a crash of thunder resounded through the room. It was the sole sound, save that of the rain hitting the windows.

Nonetheless, their fear was quickly forgotten in the face of the headmaster's biggest announcement. Once more, the Great Hall was awash in whispers as Dumbledore detailed the tournament that was to start later in the year. Quite a number of the older students – the only ones allowed to enter – from Slytherin were reluctant, but two or three could be seen nodding in agreement as Dumbledore laid out the measures that would be taken to ensure their safety. Even Holly, who could be rather paranoid about threats to her person and especially at this school, conceded that the contest seemed relatively safe. At least, safer than the others had described earlier tournaments.

Not that she would get a chance to compete or would even try to enter. She was already famous enough, and if Sirius was to be believed, she definitely didn't need the thousand Galleons prize money. Prankster though he might have been, James Potter had also been adept at managing his funds and had invested quite shrewdly in a number of Muggle ventures.

The competition was all that Slytherin House – no, all of Hogwarts – could talk about on the way to the Common Room. Conversations were abuzz with rumours and speculation. Who would enter. Which school would win. Titania, who was Head Girl this year, was adamant

about not entering. She simply had too many responsibilities, even without the added pressure of Quidditch, not to mention that her uncle had already warned her to stay out of it. Most of the House seemed to think it was still too dangerous, even with the headmaster's assurances. After all, the Girl-Who-Lived was a Slytherin, and they had up close and personal look at the quality of protection the old professor offered. They weren't the least bit reassured.

As for Holly, she was just glad not to be involved. Hoping that this year could be different. Could be quiet and peaceful. Just an ordinary year for a normal person.

But she should have known better than to jinx herself.

Que Sera, Sera: Whatever will be, will be.

AN: Sorry that this chapter was late. I had horrible finals, and my parents totalled their car. They're alright by the way. But we're all really spooked at the moment.

Finally, Theo's crush was alluded to at the end of third year, but I didn't go into details.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Forty-Three: Sine Qua Non

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Forty-Three: Sine Qua Non

Despite Holly's excitement about Defence, they didn't have it until Tuesday afternoon. She first had to wade through Divination, which was bright and early Monday morning. Followed by Arithmancy, Care of Magical Creatures with the Gryffindors, and finally Transfiguration with the Hufflepuffs. It didn't help that the Weasley twins had Moody's class right before lunch and spent the entire meal and subsequent rest of the day bragging about how brilliant it had been.

Divination went about as well as she expected. They started their study of the stars, mapping out the ones they were supposed to be born under. Trelawney was practically giddy as she announced that Holly was certainly born in midwinter due to her dark hair, tragic losses, and lack of height. She deflated when Theo blithely informed her that his friend was born in July. And further still when Milli and he commented in false undertones on how Holly was the most famous witch in Britain, not to mention one of Trelawney's students. How could the woman not know her birthday? It was practically a national holiday.

A quick use of her Time Turner, and she was down the stairs to Arithmancy. Professor Vector seemed to be having a fantastic day, all fire and enthusiasm. And her lesson flew by; she didn't even assign any homework either. Hagrid's class, on the other hand, was a trial in and of itself, featuring a brand new species he had crossbred himself. But that sounded far more fascinating than the Blast-Ended Skrewts actually were. As far as Holly and most of Slytherin were concerned, the things were dangerous and should be stamped out for the safety of everyone. After all, who wouldn't want a pet that could bite, burn, sting, and suction all at the same time?

Transfiguration was actually an improvement, which didn't really say much. Holly managed to successfully change her badger into a tea kettle, and hers didn't even have any whiskers on it. Not that McGonagall gave her any points or anything. But at least hers didn't try to attack her with an angry burst of steam like Ernie Macmillan's did.

She had Runes first thing Tuesday morning, though it was a simple review of what they'd learned the previous year. That was followed by Herbology with Ravenclaw. Holly partnered with Gavin, and between the two of them, they gained twenty points for wrangling their Wandering Wisteria into a new pot without injury. Lunch afterwards was filled with another round of commentaries on Moody's class, this time by Titania. Even for an Auror's niece, she'd been thoroughly impressed, and her mood was contagious among the fourth-years. Holly could barely contain her excitement as she and Blaise entered the classroom and sat in the first row. Everyone else filled in behind them, and for once, no one was in the back.

They heard the distinctive sound of Moody's fake leg clinking against the ground soon after. He entered the classroom and stalked up the biggest row without a word, remaining silent until he was all the way to the front.

"Books away," he barked. "You won't need them. Not in this class. They're for outside reading only."

He pulled out a parchment and went through the roll, eye whirling to each student as they were called. Moody paused at Holly's name, both eyes moving to her for a fraction of a second. She felt a twinge in the back of her mind then but dismissed it as nerves. Besides, there was something bizarre about this man. Vaguely unnerving. She supposed that had something to do with his appearance. Or perhaps simply his bearing. Like he expected to be attacked at any moment, magic eye constantly whirling.

Moody was quick to do a review after the roll. Just a check of what Remus' notes had said they'd covered. He seemed mildly impressed with all the creatures they'd gone over, but it was clear that he thought Remus had skimmed on the curses and other Dark Arts. Especially the most important three.

"So do any of you know which curses are most heavily punished by law?" he questioned, real eye scanning them as several hands slowly raised. "You, Nott."

“The three Unforgivables,” Theo replied with a blink.

The professor gave a sharp nod. “Which are?” He pointed at Draco. “Malfoy.”

“The Cruciatus curse,” Draco answered, meeting Moody’s gaze with a cool look.

“The pain curse. Don’t need screws or knives for that.” Moody’s normal eye narrowed. “You would know that one,” he grunted out but turned away to reach into his pocket. He pulled out a glass jar with a spider in it. “Needs to be bigger.” He tapped the spider, and it grew to the size of a dinner plate before Moody set it on the desk. He jerked his wand towards it. “Crucio.”

The spider jolted and twitched. Its legs curled in on themselves, practically snapping from the force of the motion. It rocked from side to side, as though trying to escape the agony. And Holly knew that had it been able to, the spider would’ve been screaming. Moody simply watched it for a minute and lifted the spell. He deposited the now shrunken spider back in its jar, and Holly saw that it was still trembling before he put it away. Everyone stared at him wide-eyed as he moved to call on Milli.

“You, girl, give me another one.”

“Er... the Imperius curse.” Her voice was hesitant. Almost afraid.

Moody nodded like he approved. He produced another spider, but he didn’t enlarge this one. Just cursed it and made it dance around like a demented jumping bean. The Slytherins all watched, equal parts fascinated and horrified. Moody didn’t seem to care that they flinched when he put the spider away.

“Imperius, the mind control curse. Can make someone do anything,” he said in that gruff tone. “Attack their friends. Murder their children. Anything! Ministry had a load of problems the last war. So many people cursed. Or claiming to be at any rate.” His attention flickered to Draco. “But it can be fought. Guarded against. I’ll be teaching you

how, but it takes real strength of character, and not everyone's got it. The best defence is not to be cursed. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!"

They jumped.

"The last one?" Moody barked.

Holly raised her hand defiantly. "The Killing curse. Avada Kedavra." She stared straight into his face, ignoring Blaise when he nudged her.

Moody stared right back with both eyes. "Yes, the Killing curse."

A smile twisted his mouth as he pulled out his last spider. It skittered across the top of his desk. Like it knew exactly what was coming.

"Avada Kedavra." Moody's voice an almost hiss, though still very audible.

A rush of green light flew at the spider and connected. It fell over dead. No marks. No signs. No life. Nothing.

"That's it, folks. Not nice. Or pleasant. And no countercurse. There's no blocking it. Only one person to survive that, and she's sitting in this class." Moody didn't even need to point for them to know who he meant.

Holly stiffened. A memory of green light and a horrible shriek filled her ears. Louder and louder and louder still. The sweeping rush of death. But then, she felt a hand find hers under the table and squeeze. Hard. She came back to herself in a flash and let out the breath she hadn't even been aware she was holding. She glanced to her right and gave Blaise a grateful grin.

"Avada Kedavra needs powerful magic behind it," Moody was saying as she turned back to him. "You lot could all get your wands out now and point them at me and say the words, but I doubt I'd get so much as a nosebleed. But that doesn't matter. I'm not here to teach you how to do it." He scanned the room. "There's no countercurse to any of them, so why am I showing you? So you can

be forewarned. Forearmed. So you won't find yourselves in a situation facing them. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!"

They all jumped again. Holly thought that he just enjoyed seeing them do that.

Moody went to the board then and waved his wand. Writing appeared, an overview of the three curses and the Ministry's punishment for them. They were all quick to grab their quills, and Moody continued speaking as they hurriedly wrote it all down. They spent the rest of the class doing much the same. None of the Slytherins dared speak until the bell. Not even to each other. And they were all quick to pack up their things when he dismissed them. Even quicker to head for the door.

Holly was the last to leave, just behind Blaise. Her attention flicked to Moody as she exited, and she saw him studying her in return. Face thoughtful and chin lifted. She left before he could call her back and hurried after her friends, the dying screams of her mother still echoing in her ears.

A few days later, they were just in the process of finishing dinner when an owl swooped in to land in front of Holly. She wiped her hands on her napkin before reaching forward to snag the letter, giving the owl a piece of ham from the table in thanks. He preened and then fluttered off as she opened the envelope.

Miss Potter,

If you would be so kind as to come to my office tonight, I have important news to discuss with you. I apologise for the inconvenience, but it was just brought to my attention this afternoon.

A. Dumbledore

P.S.

I understand that your godfather is fond of acid pops.

"Who's it from?" Blaise questioned as he leaned over to look.

She handed him the note. "The headmaster. Only... I have no idea what he wants to talk about."

"I assume that you're still going, right?" Draco asked when Blaise passed it on to him.

"I'll stop by after dinner. I hope nothing's happened," she admitted.

Luna tilted her head. "If it had, I should think that Professor Snape would've pulled you aside. Perhaps it has something to do with the World Cup. Or maybe even with your class schedule."

It went without saying that she meant the Time Turner.

"That's a good possibility," Gavin acknowledged across from them. "I should think..."

The rest of his sentence was lost as they suddenly became aware of someone approaching their section of the table. Holly glanced behind her to see Blaise's cousin standing just beyond Theo's shoulder.

The sixth-year waved. "Hey, Slytherins. And fellow Ravenclaws," Alé added with a smile at Luna and Gavin.

"Cousin," Blaise returned, moving over to give her room to sit.

She squeezed in between him and Theo. "I wasn't sure if Luna had heard yet, but the girls are all invited to a sleepover we're having in Ravenclaw. "It's for first through sixth-years on the night before Halloween. All Houses are welcome but girls only."

Pansy, seeming intrigued, nodded. "Does this have anything to do with the tournament?"

"Right in one. A few of us got together and decided to do something special for the younger years since they can't enter. The girls unanimously decided to do a sleepover. Flitwick is going to enlarge one of the old teaching halls and clear it out for us. There'll be food, music, all sorts of good things." She winked at them. "Interested?"

All the girls glanced at each other. Milli's arms were crossed over her chest, but there was a pensive cast her face. Daphne, Autumn, and Cynthia were all grinning with excitement. Pansy looked ready to agree then and there. Holly thought for a moment, even as she wondered if it would bother Luna since she didn't generally get along with her House, but even the blonde seemed intrigued by the prospect.

Finally, Milli spoke for them all. "Looks like we'll be there. What time?"

"Starts just after dinner. Just come as you are. Everything will be provided," Alé informed them. She smiled, obviously pleased that they had agreed.

"It's definite then," Daphne put in. "Thanks for the invite, by the way."

There was a chorus of agreement.

Alé waved them off. "Slytherin and Ravenclaw have long been friends here, and you lot have been particularly good to us." Her eyes flicked to Luna but then drifted away. "If that's all then, I'll see you later." She rose and departed.

Holly watched after her as she made her way to a different section of Slytherin's table, undoubtedly spreading the good news. She also noticed that several other Ravenclaws were moving amongst the tables in the Great Hall. Probably on a similar mission.

"Interesting that they would do this," Draco commented.

Theo nodded. "I wonder what the boys will be doing."

"Who cares?" Milli shot back. "I just wonder who all will show. I suppose that a few Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors will be there."

“I can hardly imagine Granger or the youngest Weasley going,” Pansy offered snidely. “But some of the others might. The Quidditch girls probably. They seem to be pretty popular.”

“Not Johnson,” Holly said. “She’s a seventh-year, so she’ll probably be excluded. Perhaps the other two though. Not that it really matters or anything.” She glanced at her watch. “I should be going on. I saw Dumbledore leave awhile ago.”

Blaise faced her. “Do you want me to go with you?” There was a hint of concern to his words.

“I’ll be fine. Besides, I doubt that it’s anything bad,” she assured him as she stood. “I’ll see you back in the Common Room.”

With that, she walked from the room and up the stairs just outside. The trip to the headmaster’s office was a familiar one. Holly had been there several times before, most recently at the end of the previous school year when she and Sirius had been making arrangements with Dumbledore. The gargoyle bowed and moved out of the way at the password, and the Slytherin headed to the office door. It opened before she could even knock, and the elderly professor was quick to beckon her inside. He motioned her over to a side table and not his desk proper, sitting down across from her. Just coming from dinner, Holly declined the biscuits he offered but did take the juice a house-elf brought. The headmaster, in turn, just leaned back in his chair, inspecting her over his glasses. And after several moments of small talk, he finally broke the subject at hand.

“Undoubtedly, you are unaware of this, but Nicholas and Pernelle Flamel have recently passed through the veil,” Dumbledore began. “Their will has been in probate over the last several months. There were many claimants who were not actually named, and a number of them contested this fact. However, the goblins have been quite obstinate and have worked tirelessly to clear the matter up. They were rather fond of the Flamels as I understand it.”

Holly just blinked. “Flamels? I thought that they died after my first year, and what does this have to do with me?”

The old man sighed and gazed at her with tired eyes. "They lived until just this last summer. Far longer than they had originally believed without the elixir to sustain them. As to your other question, I am telling you this because you are named in their will. You are actually one of the main beneficiaries."

The Slytherin felt her mouth go dry. Even as her stomach settled somewhere near her ankles.

"What?" It came out a half-strangled squeak.

"You are one of the main beneficiaries of their will," he repeated. "As am I. Both of us inherit from them. Quite a lot in fact."

Holly covered her mouth with her hand and stared at him like she'd never seen anything like him before. Her mind was racing. Doing its utmost to find some logic in what he'd just told her. It didn't make any sense. No sense at all. She didn't even know these people!

"But why?" Holly finally managed to ask, voice sounding surprisingly calm. "They never even met me. I don't know them."

"You never even met them either, my dear, but you tried to save the Stone from Voldemort," Dumbledore responded softly. He looked rather old in that moment, old but still alive and feeling. "You tried to help them without knowing them."

"But I wasn't trying to help them," she argued. "I was just keeping it away from Voldemort. They never really factored into it."

The headmaster shook his head. "They did. I assure you that they did. One of the first things you asked me after that terrible day was what would happen to them, and you were so upset when you learned that they would die. Nicholas and his wife were quite surprised when I told them this."

“You told them?” the girl questioned. She was completely bamboozled. She’d never really thought of what Dumbledore must have said to them about her exploit.

“Of course.” His tone was so very bright and amused, a ready change from the weariness of before. “When I explained what had happened with their Stone, they asked after you. They were very much impressed with your bravery. With how hard you worked to protect their livelihood.”

“I... I don’t understand,” she admitted with wide green eyes. “Surely, they must have someone better for this. What about you?”

Dumbledore searched her face. “As I said, they are leaving me quite a bit. Far more than I will ever need or want. But they have also included you on that very short list.” He paused to study her once more. “You have to understand, Holly, all of their children are long since dead. As are their grandchildren and great grandchildren. They have living descendants, most of whom never even knew Nicholas or Pernelle. That includes your godfather.”

“Sirius? Sirius is related to the Flamels?” she asked with disbelief and attempted to remember if he had ever mentioned that fact.

“Yes, rather distantly. A many times great grandson. He might not even know,” the old professor responded. “The Flamel family also intermarried with the Potters, but not those of your direct lineage. Their descendants would have been your cousins had they lived.”

“Oh.” Holly considered. “But with so many relatives, there still has to be someone better for this. More deserving.” She glanced down then, eyes distant and glazed.

“There isn’t anyone more deserving. The Flamels certainly didn’t think so, and neither do I.” He reached across the table to place his hand on her clenched fist. “Nicholas wanted to ensure that their work would be put to good use. They knew that they could trust you with it. That you would not misuse what was given to you. Just as you did not misuse the Stone.” He allowed that information to sink in. “They

often asked of you over the last two years, and I dare say that they were proud of you, proud that you would help others in such a way. I think that had he lived, Nicholas would have even offered you an apprenticeship. A very rare thing indeed."

The girl finally looked up, green eyes meeting blue. She swallowed, mouth still dry and reached for her glass with her free hand. Dumbledore simply watched her, giving her time to digest what he had said.

"It is harder to be good than evil, my dear girl, but good should always be rewarded," he told her gently. "They wanted to reward you for all that you have done. For all that you will do. They wanted to help you."

Holly gazed at him and very slowly nodded her head. "I... yes. That's fine."

The headmaster patted her hand. "Good." He pulled away.

"Do I have to go anywhere? Do anything?" she inquired after a few heartbeats.

"Since you are a minor, Sirius will act in your stead. I don't believe he wants you to miss any classes." Dumbledore seemed amused by this fact. "He will sign all the necessary paperwork on your behalf, though he will most likely be visiting the castle to discuss your inheritance in the next few days. Perhaps Saturday would be best."

"That's perfectly fine, Headmaster. Whatever is most convenient for him." Holly rubbed her hand over her cheek. "What exactly am I supposed to be getting?"

"Books. Notes. Artefacts. A few other intriguing things. And gold. You'll most certainly get that." The old man chuckled. "I have a complete list with me if you wish to look at it. Goldfinger, their executor, was kind enough to provide it for me. His clan has been friends with Nicholas for a great many years." He stood and went to his desk, opening a drawer. "I dare say with the right contact and

exchanges, that friendship might pass on to you. But that should probably wait until you are older. Goblins have always been a patient people, and they prefer those who are much the same.” He returned with a rolled parchment.

Her eyebrows lifted at how thick it was. And then again when she glimpsed the writing inside. It would take at least an hour to go through this. The headmaster didn’t seem to care, however, already set to walk her through it.

“Are you sure, Professor?” the Slytherin asked him. “I can look it over in my dorm. This will take some time.”

He smiled at her concern but brushed it off. “I will always have time for you, Holly.” His sincerity was very clear. “And it’s best if we do it together in case you have any questions.”

Holly looked at him but said nothing. She simply bent forward to see him point at the first item, his voice washing over her as he explained.

Sure enough, Sirius came that Saturday to go over everything with her. He’d already signed the necessary paperwork, and most of the items had been set aside in a separate vault for Remus and him to sort through in their spare time. Not that they had much else to do. Both were unemployed. Sirius didn’t need the money and was already busy with his daily visits – read appointments – to Saint Mungo’s. Holly suspected that his trips there also had a different purpose. He had been trained as a medic for the Aurors and had once mentioned an interest in Healing. Perhaps he was receiving some additional training.

Remus, on the other hand, couldn’t get a job because he’d been outed as a werewolf, and Holly knew that he felt like he was mooching off his best mate. She didn’t know the details, but they had worked out an arrangement with Remus doing various errands and odd jobs. Sirius honestly would’ve just given him the money, but his friend didn’t like to depend on charity.

She showed the list to Blaise that afternoon when they were in Sirius’ old room and away from the others. Her friends knew that she had

inherited from the Flamels, but Holly was very reluctant to tell them how much. That was only reinforced by Blaise's reaction. He took a single look at the parchment before turning to goggle at her.

"Circe, Holly! If you weren't rich before, you certainly would be now." Blaise glanced through again. "I don't even know what half this stuff is."

"His notes on alchemy. Her notes on runes and wards." She tapped the inventory at several places. "Some of the most powerful and secure warding in the world is based on her work, and she left me basically a cheat sheet to how it all works."

"Some of this is priceless," he told her. "Warding. Alchemy. It has to be. You could spend the rest of your life doing nothing and still have enough for your kids to do the same. And that's just from the gold and things I recognise on here."

She bit her lip. "Well, I'm not the only one to inherit. Dumbledore got a lot, too. And a few other people."

He let out a little chuckle.

"Don't laugh," Holly ordered with a slight smirk. "They even left some gold for you and the Gryffindors. Thanks for helping me first year." She stopped him before he could speak. "Nowhere near what they left me, but I bet it's a few hundred Galleons. You'll undoubtedly be getting a letter from your mum over the next few days. She's probably the one they notified. The goblins are still working through the list of people. Dumbledore only told me since I was getting so much."

"Really?" he rubbed his chin when she shrugged. "Interesting." He seemed to be considering. "Do you know who else inherited?"

"No." She fidgeted in her chair. "Dumbledore only mentioned it in passing." Holly was silent for a moment, gaze distant. "It's so strange. So weird that I'm benefitting from their deaths," she admitted.

Blaise wrapped an arm around her. "I know. But they must have really liked you. And they trusted you, too."

"I just... I would've gone to see them. I thought they'd already died." She shifted to lean against him.

"Maybe they didn't want you to worry," he surmised. "To feel bad about the Stone. Or maybe they didn't want you to become attached knowing that they'd die soon. It would've only hurt you."

She pondered that. "I suppose, but I wish that I could've thanked them."

"I think the whole point was to thank you," Blaise pointed out. "Not the other way around."

Holly sighed. "I guess."

He squeezed her arm and motioned for her to rise. "I think that you could use some cheering up. Let's go find the others and work on duelling. That always makes me feel better. You can pair up with Draco." Blaise sniggered.

"You just want to watch me stomp him into the dirt again." The girl snorted. "Not my fault that I'm so good at it." She tucked her inventory back in her bag and moved to follow him.

"There is that," Blaise allowed. "Perhaps we should duel you together. More of a challenge that way. And it's harder to read us both at the same time." He headed down the passageway and back towards the dorms. "Maybe you could go to Moody for some pointers or something. I'll bet that he could teach you a lot."

"I don't know," she responded with a small shiver. "There's something odd about him, and I don't just mean the 'Constant Vigilance' part. He just feels strange to me. And I can't read him at all. He has impeccable shields."

The boy made a motion with his hand. "To be expected from an Auror of his calibre. Maybe all that paranoia is finally getting to him. It's got to be a strain, you know. All those people still hunting for him. Families and friends of the people he captured."

"I'd say it does," Holly acknowledged. "But I don't think I will learn much if I'm not comfortable with him. I'll give it a few weeks and see what happens." She paused to scan the hallway on the other side of portrait exit and then pushed it open when she found no one. "Besides, I believe that we'll learn more than enough from him. I'm half convinced that he's going to cast the Unforgivables on us."

Her friend laughed. "He'll probably do it so that we know what it feels like. Be better prepared when all those crazed wizards come after us. Constant vigilance and all." He chuckled again.

Three days later, Blaise was no longer laughing.

"Crazy," Draco mumbled to him. "Absolutely insane! Casting Imperius on schoolchildren."

"He's barking mad if he thinks that he can do this," Pansy agreed with a jab of her finger. "Dumbledore'll have a conniption. Not to mention the Ministry."

Milli sniffed. "Like that will stop him. Besides, he already said that Dumbledore approved."

"At least it's not the Cruciatus," Holly inserted with mock-brightness from her other side. Her eyes flickered to the front

Theo gave her a dirty look. "Small favours."

"If you lot are finished," a gruff voice cut in.

Everyone but Holly jumped. She had sensed him approaching. She shifted towards the front, the only one who hadn't half-fallen out of her seat. The others took a moment to get resituated with Moody just watching them with narrowed eyes.

It only went downhill from there.

Their professor was determined to put all of them through their paces and called them up one by one. Vincent was the first to fall, forced to imitate a rooster and then a crocodile. Greg was next, doing cartwheels in an entire circuit around the room. Daphne sang a rather good rendition of "God Save the Queen" while gurgling water, and Pansy did an impressive pantomime of waltzing followed by a tap-dance. Moody seemed to take an almost sadistic sort of glee in making Draco strip to his underthings and turn all his clothes inside out before putting them back on. And Holly swore that he almost laughed when he forced Theo into thinking that he was really the lead singer of the Weird Sisters.

Then, it was Holly's turn.

The spell washed over her like warm water, and the most incredible sense of contentment swept through her, spreading from her chest where the curse had connected to her arms and down her legs. Then to her feet and hands and up to her neck. Finally, it crept over her face to settle in her brain. And then, something most peculiar happened; the magic met her mental shields.

Holly's eyes snapped open. She could feel the spell attempting to breach her mind, searching for even the smallest crack to slip through. Curling and snaking over the surface.

"Jump onto the desk."

She heard the words but didn't know where they were coming from. The curse jabbed at her mind.

"Jump onto the desk."

It stabbed again. Over and over.

"...onto the desk."

But Holly didn't want that. She wanted to stay where she was. Wanted to expel the intruder. And like a Chaser seeing the Quaffle, Holly grabbed and pulled. Flung the curse out of her mind like she'd throw away a piece of rubbish. But little tendrils frantically clung on.

"The desk. Onto the desk."

"No," she whispered. "No, I won't." She shook her head, dispelling the very last vestiges.

"Onto the desk. Jump onto the desk."

"I said no!" It was almost a shout. Holly whirled to face Moody, breath coming in short pants.

However, the man was smiling, lopsided mouth in a full-on grin. "See here. Potter fought it off. Very good indeed. They'll have trouble controlling you."

Moody insisted on casting the curse twice more. Just to see if it was a fluke. But she shook it off even faster both times. Holly didn't know whether to be proud of this fact or shift uneasily at the calculating look her teacher gave her. It didn't help that she could feel the eyes of all her friends on her, surprised but pleased. Blaise especially was bursting with excitement. A good thing since Moody called him up next.

Holly just settled back in her chair, watching as their professor tried to get him to eat an entire conjured cake. But something very odd was happening. It was like Blaise couldn't quite make up his mind. He'd reach for a piece, only to immediately drop it back on the plate and then reach for another. It went back and forth that way for a full five minutes before Blaise managed to force himself to step away, shaking his head furiously. Moody cast it again for good measure, but Blaise again freed himself again.

"Good, good," the ex-Auror said as he finished the spell. "Took you awhile, but you eventually conquered it." He paused as Blaise staggered to his seat. "Unusual to have two people strong enough to

throw it off in the same class. Much less on the first try.” His eyes observed them appraisingly.

Holly felt her stomach sink. She knew exactly why she could throw it off, and she had a feeling that was related to why Blaise could as well. Or perhaps all their adventuring had made them of sterner stuff than everyone else.

As it turned out, they were the only ones to successfully fight Imperius. No one else even came close in their class. Though they did learn later that Neville had managed it by the fourth or fifth time Moody cursed him. Nevertheless, they were the only fourth-years with the ability. There were rumours that some of the older students had eventually done it, but none of them on the first try. Yet another thing that set Holly apart. But at least, Blaise was right there with her.

Thankfully, nobody made a big deal of it. Or even really talked about it at all. Especially after a notice was posted outside the Great Hall two weeks before Halloween.

TRIWARD TOURNAMENT

The delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving at 6 o'clock on Friday the 30th of October. Lessons will end half an hour early. Students will return their bags and books to their dormitories and assemble in front of the castle to greet our guests before the Welcoming Feast.

“Durmstrang?” Milli commented when she saw the notice just before lunch. “Isn’t that where Victor Krum went to school?”

“That’s right,” Draco replied, perking up considerably. He’d been a bit twitchy lately, convinced that Moody was out to get him and was stalking him around the castle.

Holly scrunched in between them to take a look. “I thought that he was still a student.”

“Really?” Blaise inquired from behind her shoulder. “Perhaps he’ll be in the group that comes.”

“I hope so,” Pansy put in. “I hear he’s rather good looking.”

Draco made a face, while Blaise snorted and Milli rolled her eyes.

“Kind of like an overgrown hawk,” Holly admitted. “Duck-footed on the ground, but he’s brilliant in the air.” A soft smile tugged her lips in remembrance of seeing him fly.

Milli elbowed Blaise in the side. “Don’t look now, Zabini. Someone might usurp your place.”

He sidestepped. “I’m not worried.”

“You’re irreplaceable, Blaise.” Holly winked at him.

He smirked. “Thanks. I love you, too.”

“Aw... Was that a love confession I heard, dear brother?” a voice questioned from the side.

“I believe it was, brother dear,” another identical voice answered.

“Should we be jealous?”

“Think we should.”

“Fred, George,” Holly greeted without even turning around.

The twins beamed. “Holly and the Slytherins.”

“Sounds like music group,” Milli commented under her breath.

Fred just ignored her. “Interested in the tournament?” he asked when he saw them looking at the announcement.

“It’s not like we could enter if we were,” Draco returned, checking behind him to make sure Moody hadn’t snuck up when he wasn’t looking.

“Or that you could enter,” Holly added with a vague motion of her hand. “Your birthday’s in April.”

“Oh,” Pansy said, “that means you missed the deadline.”

George waved a finger at her. “Oh, ye of little faith. My dear twin and I have a plan. Don’t we, brother?”

“Brother, we do.” Fred slung an arm around his shoulder. “Several in fact.”

“We’re not interested,” Holly put in before they could even ask. “I’ve had my fill of death defying adventure. I think I’ll sit this one out.”

“Oh, how you wound me.” George took one of her hands in his. “Does this mean you won’t be the brave damsel to my cowardly knight?”

The girl shook her head. “You’ll have to do without me this year.”

Draco sniffed. “Besides, everybody knows you’re just in it for the money.” He held up his hands at the glares shot his way. “I mean that in the best possible sense.”

Fred studied him for a moment but shrugged. “Our pranks don’t come cheap. Perhaps we need investors.”

“People fascinated by a little harmless fun,” George continued.

The Slytherins snorted in unison. Harmless was hardly in the Weasley twins’ vocabulary.

“You know us too well,” Fred admitted with a shake of his head.

“That they do,” George went on. He tugged at his brother’s arm. “Come, Fred. Let us away. Places to be.”

“People to do.”

“Pranks to play.”

“Professors to avoid,” Holly put in with a subtle slant of her head towards McGonagall, who was just coming down the stairs.

“Too true,” the twins said together, and with a wave, they slunk into the Great Hall.

The Slytherins looked at each other and shrugged. Milli snickered and followed them inside at a slower pace, Pansy right behind her. Draco ran a hand over his hair and picked a piece of imaginary lint off his sleeve before going after them. Blaise quietly trailed behind him, lingering as he waited for Holly. She cast one last look at the notice before following.

For some strange and inexplicable reason, she felt a spike of dread shoot down her spine.

Sine Qua Non: Without Which Not. Or “something which is necessary or cannot be done without.”

AN: So I was messing around on Google and typed in my author name. Apparently, I’m on the best of the worst list for “Potter-Sue” from way back in 2005. Even I admit that my version of this story was horrible back then. Made me laugh for hours in remembrance.

Also, I’ve had several people critiquing me on my use of Spanish. First of all, Blaise speaks Spanish because Dante does – his sister lives there. He hasn’t actively spoken Italian since he was very small, but he is constantly exposed to Spanish through his papa. Second, adding “ito” or “ita” to certain words denotes something that is little. For example, pero means dog, while perito means little dog or (sometimes) puppy. Third, Blaise says “Te amo” because this verb

does not necessarily have a sexual connotation. “Te quiero” almost always does.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Forty-Four: Tournaments and Treachery

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Forty-Four: Tournaments and Treachery

The weeks before Halloween seemed to fly by. Everyone lived in an excited haze, bursting with enthusiasm about the upcoming tournament. Speculation abounded about the other schools included, wondering who they would send. Not to mention who would be Hogwarts' own champion. How the champions would be chosen. What tasks they had to perform. Which school would win.

It seemed like everybody had a theory.

Holly, however, had her mind on other things. She honestly couldn't care less about the tournament. For once in her life, Hogwarts actually seemed safe. She didn't have to look over her shoulder and wonder who was lurking in the shadows. No Dark Lord attached to her Defence professor. No Slytherin's monster or students being possessed. No escaped criminals or rat Animagi in the hallways. Only Pettigrew and Voldemort lingered on her thoughts, but her nightmares from the summer were distant from her and hadn't been repeated since the World Cup. Sure, she still worried about Sirius and Remus. But her life was relatively calm and comfortable compared to how it had been before. She didn't want to jinx herself by being concerned about things that were out of her scope and the realm of possibility. Even though Luna definitely sensed something in the future, something about the tournament, Holly just couldn't bring herself to care. She wasn't competing, so what did it matter?

All in all, life was going well. They started new runic sets with Professor Rosetta, Norse this time, and Vector had set them to modifying the base work of simple spells, a nice change from the year before when they only had deconstructed. Hagrid still had them running after his Blast-ended Skrewts, which were growing at an alarming rate. Trelawney was the same as usual, as were McGonagall, Snape, and Sprout. Flitwick had them working on several new charms, but he wasn't all that different. Moody though was the real deal.

His lessons were just as interesting as the first few. Full of practical advice and personal experience. Even if she couldn't touch his thoughts or sense him very well, Holly truly felt that she learned

something worthwhile from his class, skills that might actually save her life one day. Like the others, she wasn't thrilled to be put under Imperius, but she could also see the reasoning behind it at the same time. They really did need to know what it was like, how to recognise it from real world application; those might be the only things to save them in the end.

Her friends had a range of opinions about the man. Draco swore that Moody was stalking him, but nobody really paid him mind. Blaise liked him well enough but was still cautious. Tom didn't care one way or the other, not having him as a teacher, while Milli and Theo thought he was the best thing since self-inking quills. Pansy and Cynthia liked his lessons but were rather disturbed by his eye and general appearance. Gavin was too busy being intrigued to be bothered, and the rest were ambivalent yet hopeful. Only Luna was truly hesitant with him, though Holly suspected that was because she too had a hard time reading the man.

So no, Moody and the tournament weren't really concerns at the moment. Neither was school. The Zabini family was in excellent spirits, and Eren's letters were always full of good cheer. Sirius seemed to be doing well with his visits to Saint Mungo's, especially with all the extra time he spent there. Either he had a girlfriend or he really was working on his Healer training. Remus was still reluctant to go out with his recent werewolf revelation to the world at large, but he hadn't had any further problems that Holly was aware of. The incident in Diagon was frightening, yes, but his situation and true nature were old news now. The wizarding world had other things on its mind.

The real thing that had Holly's attention was Tom. He was becoming something of a recluse as of late. Holly hadn't talked to him in weeks. Though to be perfectly honest, they hadn't really had a conversation since the summer. Between schoolwork and the Flamel estate and Sirius and about a half-dozen other things, she just didn't get around to seeing him. Besides, Luna often took off with his diary for days on end, and Holly suspected that it was because the girl was lonely in class. After all, most of her friends were in Slytherin and not in her year to boot. Further, Tom didn't even have Sirius to spend time with like he'd done the previous year. The older teen didn't outwardly seem to mind being left to his own devices, but she couldn't help but

feel bad for him. There were only so many ways to entertain oneself when trapped by a diary and hidden from most of the school's population. Yes, he read and worked on various projects, but he had little interaction with people nowadays.

It simply wasn't healthy.

Which was why the Saturday before Halloween, Holly made it a point to sneak off into Slytherin's secret passageways. Tom had set himself up a nice set of rooms close by where Sirius had stayed, and it seemed that if he wasn't with Luna, that he was ensconced there instead. He was working on something top secret at the moment, and she couldn't begin to guess what. Holly knew that he was obviously concerned about his counterpart, but neither of them had any new information on that point. Nor did it involve any of his other projects. Things ranging from spell manipulation to runic charts to mental bonds to eye magic to fix Holly's need for glasses. That last really made her suspect that he had far too much time on his hands.

She entered his front room without knocking, instead choosing to send out a mental tendril of greeting. He responded back immediately, and Holly didn't need to be psychic to see his surprise when he popped his head through the far door and all but goggled at her. And if that didn't tell her all she needed to know about what he thought of her recent absence, she'd eat the Sorting Hat. She really needed to be a better friend.

"Holly?" Tom questioned like he couldn't quite believe his eyes. He stepped out into the main room, and she couldn't help but notice that he didn't walk all the way over to her. "Is there something you need?"

And now, he thought that she'd only come around when she wanted something. Wonderful. She truly was a lousy friend.

"I just stopped in for a visit," the girl said, not able to keep the shame completely from her voice. "I haven't seen you for awhile, so I thought I'd stop by."

His dark eyes narrowed. As though he believed this to be some sort of trick. And his posture was stiff, gaze unblinking as he all but stared.

“Oh?” Somehow, he made that one word say a lot. “Well, I’m perfectly fine. As you can see.” His tone was easy but vaguely insulting. Like he had stepped in something smelly.

Well, two could play that game. She might feel bad about not being around lately, but he didn’t need to be rude.

“So I see,” she returned, stepping closer. “You’re looking well.” If by well, she meant sort of transparent. “Been keeping busy, have you?”

Tom fought the urge to sniff. A good thing since it made him look far too much like Draco for anyone’s comfort.

She waited a moment for him to reply, and when he didn’t, she just glanced at him. He was steadily avoiding her eyes, looking at a point over her shoulder. Standing just out of reach and in a position that clearly said he didn’t want to be touched. Tom wasn’t the friendliest of people, but he wasn’t normally standoffish either.

And something a great deal like guilt settled in the pit of her stomach and stayed there.

“I’m sorry,” Holly said finally. She didn’t even have to explain what the apology was for.

Tom gave an elegant half-shrug. “You’re busy. You have your own life. I understand,” he replied, sounding perfectly truthful. But there was something to his tone. Something that made her think of that lonely boy from the orphanage without any real friends.

“I miss you,” she admitted with a sharp bite to her lip, not intending to say that at all. “I haven’t seen in a while. I’ve just been--”

“Busy,” he inserted. “I know. You have your own life, after all.”

“That’s not an excuse. And I don’t intend to give you one.” Holly let that sink in for a minute or two. “But I’m here now.”

“So you are.” His gaze flicked to her, and she saw the barest trace of relief before that was covered up. “You can relax, you know. I won’t bite.”

The word yet hovered between them. But that only made Holly chuckle.

She looked around, noting the changes from the last time she’d been here. Not many truths to be told. Just a few extra bookcases stashed here and there. All of them crammed full. If she didn’t know better, Holly would swear the things were breeding when her back was turned.

“Not breeding, I assure you.” Tom smirked like he’d read her mind. Perhaps he had.

“Am I even going to have gold left by the time you’re finished buying out Flourish and Blotts?” she questioned with amusement, stepping forward to inspect the nearest shelf.

She idly considered the wisdom of setting up a direct withdraw system on her account. It wasn’t like Tom had much need of it outside of his bibliophilia – not requiring food, clothes, or other supposed necessities would do that. But she would still like to have something left by the time she graduated.

Holly blinked as she reran that thought through her head.

Scratch that. With what the Flamels had given her that wouldn’t ever be a problem. Tom could spend as much as he wanted. Maybe she should just give him his own account or something.

“Perhaps a few Knuts,” Tom conceded wickedly. “But I didn’t buy most of these.”

She trailed her fingers over a cover and belatedly recognised it from the Black family library. Actually, now that she really thought about it, most of these were from there. Not that Sirius would care that Tom had them or anything. Truth be told, the Animagus probably took some sort of sadistic delight in letting his family things be handled by someone with less than the purest blood. If they weren't already dead for the most part, they'd surely keel over at the thought that a Mudblood was daring to sully their precious works.

"Sirius gave these to you?" She pulled out a thin, black book and inspected the outside.

"For the most part. He said that I could have whatever I wanted." Tom wandered over to where she stood. "I find them intriguing.

Holly had no doubt about that as she opened the book in her hand and flipped through. The pages were in pristine condition, though everything was hand-written and obviously old. Preservation spells then. And rather powerful ones at that. Clearly this book – and the others around it – contained material important enough to be protected.

The girl turned back to the first page. There was only an author listed.

"Phineas Nigellus," she read aloud.

The name sounded vaguely familiar.

"He had quite the mind for enchanting," Tom commented. "And a rather sharp wit. I find his writing style entertaining."

Which probably meant that he was a sarcastic bastard who could put Professor Snape to shame. Who would be mortified to learn that the last person in his family was a former Auror turned escaped criminal turned whatever-the-hell-Sirius-was-now. And even worse, a Gryffindor. Blacks, after all, were traditionally in Slytherin or Ravenclaw.

Tom had a bemused cast to his face like he was privy to that thought. "He was even a headmaster at Hogwarts."

"Really?" Holly processed that. "Interesting." She slipped the book back in its place and selected another one from a lower shelf. It was in similar condition to the first, though thicker with a very fascinating runic scheme on the cover. Again, no title and only an author.

"Dominic de Dorée."

"A necromancer of some renowned. He lived during the time of the Founders and was a supposedly a vampire." Tom drummed his fingers on his elbow.

She considered. "He might even still be alive then. That is, if no one has hunted him down. Vampires aren't exactly the most popular people."

A true enough statement. Europe as a whole wasn't very friendly to their kind. Especially with all that Vlad the Impaler nonsense a few centuries previous.

Holly returned this book, just as she had the one previous, and selected a third from the highest shelf she could reach. The second her fingers touched the bindings, she felt a ripple of magic. Ancient and very powerful magic. Something that was very evident given that this book looked to be in superb condition, the best of the three, despite the fact that she could tell it was the oldest. Probably by a considerable margin.

Her eyes scanned over the name listed. And then again.

"Er... Tom, this book is written by Morgana le Fey. The Morgana le Fey. The mother of modern magic herself. Only Merlin is more famous."

He smirked again. "I know."

Her eyes narrowed as she glanced back at the first page. "Of Souls and the Dark." Her focus went to him then, but he said nothing. She just shook her head and moved to put it back in place, thoughts fast and furious as she did.

Enchanting. Necromancy. Soul magic.

There was a teasing link between the three that was on the edge of solidifying in her mind. And she had a suspicion, a vague but all too plausible notion that she just needed to confirm.

"What are you working on?" Holly asked as she lowered herself back from her tip-toes.

He paused, and the girl had the distinct feeling that an inner debate was waging inside of him. She could feel the thoughts racing through his head but respected his privacy enough to keep her distance. Tom was never one to like others mucking about in his head, not that she could blame him. There were certain things that were just not fit for public consumption or even for well-meaning friends. Such things were best kept locked away.

Holly saw that rather clearly as she watched him. Saw his hands clenched and then relax. Face tighten and brow thin as he thought. And she just waited, wondering if he would give her a true answer or brush her off. She rather thought she deserved the latter more than the former.

Yet, after several tense moments, he finally turned to gaze at her. "I'm working on how to free myself. On how to get out of my diary." He lifted his chin, arms crossed defensively over his chest, as if daring her to make a negative comment.

And there it was. Suspicion confirmed.

She tilted her head with interest. They'd looked into this before but had never made any real progress. The problem was that they simply couldn't find anything even close to what had happened to Tom, to what he was now. Not a ghost, a reflection of what once was. But not alive either. Not in the traditional sense of the word. He could think

and feel, could even cast spells and move around, but Tom was still bound by the diary. Unable to move more than a few meters from it at a time. Unable to walk around as a normal person or to go as he pleased. Unable to really live.

Holly had no delusions that should anyone outside their circle discover him that things would end badly. That his diary – and him along with it – would be confiscated. That she wouldn't see him again. Especially once they realised who and what he really was. Lord Voldemort was not someone to be taken lightly, and wizards had very long memories for certain things.

But Tom wasn't party to her inner monologue this time. Instead, he had his diary in hand, having produced it from some fifth dimension when she wasn't looking. But it was the way he held his diary, the way he stared at the cover as though it had personally offended him. Maybe it had.

"I want to leave this thing." He fingered the book as one would a particularly disgusting piece of rubbish before shoving it onto a nearby surface. "I want to get out of here." His voice was cold but burning. Echoing things that she should've noticed before. Things she would've noticed had she been there.

"You mean, permanently," the girl clarified, green eyes studying him intently.

"I don't want to be stuck forever," he bit out, decidedly staring at the wall. "Always looking like this, while everyone else ages. While you--" He abruptly cut off.

"While we grow up," Holly guessed. "While we continue on with our lives."

Tom couldn't bring himself to say the words, so he simply nodded.

"Does Luna know?" she asked as a sudden thought occurred to her.

“About this?” He shook his head. “No. I haven’t told her. I haven’t told any of them.”

She mused over this for a minute, but there was only one real thing she could say. “Have you made any progress?”

“Some. But frustratingly little where it really counts.”

Well, that was about as clear as mud. And could mean anything from not knowing where to start to simply not finding what he wanted.

Holly could practically see his irritation coming off of him in waves. “Well?” she prompted.

“Well, what?” he snapped back but quieted afterwards. The closest he could currently get to an apology.

“What do you have?” She motioned with her hand.

Tom blinked. “You’re going to help me?” The question came off as both suspicious and incredulous. As though he couldn’t decide between his own paranoia and surprise.

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I?” She stepped into his line of sight, wanting him to see her sincerity.

“Don’t you have other things to do?” It was said softly yet was somehow full of meaning.

“I can make the time,” she responded. “I should’ve before.”

“I can find it on my own,” he insisted. “You don’t have to do this.”

But what Tom really meant was “It’s not your problem.”

And Holly certainly deserved that dismissal. Really, she did. But she wasn’t about to let this go.

“Yes, I do. I...” She exhaled deeply. “You’re my friend. And you’ve been there for me when I needed it. I think it’s passed the time that I return the favour.”

“Friend... yes...” he murmured to himself, and then finally – finally! – he looked at her. “I suppose if you really are that eager... I’m not one to look a gift Kneazle in the mouth.” He gave her his best Slytherin look, but his eyes told the true story.

She simply inclined her head. “So what do you have?”

“Like I said earlier, not much.” Tom managed a very slight smile, and he tilted his head as he considered. “Tell me, have you ever heard of a horcrux?”

The day before Halloween, all the students gathered in front of the school. Ostensibly to welcome their guests. In reality, Holly felt that it was more to gawk at the newcomers like a bunch of Muggleborns on their first trip to Diagon. It didn’t help, of course, that their guests decided to oblige them by arriving in the most spectacular methods possible.

Beauxbatons came first in their horse-drawn carriage. It went without saying that this carriage was magical, which meant that it flew instead of travelling across the ground; that would be too common, wouldn’t it? And it was preceded by at least a dozen enormous, winged-horses. Ones that would make Hagrid weep with envy except for the fact that they didn’t look at all ferocious. Majestic, yes. Frightening, not so much. Maybe he wouldn’t like them after all.

The carriage touched down on Hogwarts front lawn without so much as displacing a blade of grass, and before the horses could even properly settle, the door opened and out descended a boy in light blue robes followed by the largest woman Holly had even seen. She was easily the size of Hagrid and could undoubtedly wrestle a troll without much effort. But she moved with uncommon grace as she approached Dumbledore, greeting him with genuine warmth and pleasantness. Madame Maxime – as the headmaster called her –

was trailed by a dozen older teenagers dressed in a similar fashion to the first boy from the carriage. All of them seemed to be shivering as they huddled in her shadow, most likely because their robes were made of fine silk and they lacked the sense to cast a Warming charm.

Before Dumbledore even had the chance to sort them out, Durmstrang chose to arrive in style. And by style, Holly meant that the lake suddenly lit up like a Christmas tree – complete with swirling whirlpool – before a ship sprang from the water. Those gathered whirled around en masse to gape as it approached the near shore, dropping anchor with a loud clang in the shallows. What she could only assume were students descended from the gangplank, wrapped in furs thick enough that she knew they must come from somewhere very cold indeed. The headmaster was dressed similarly, though his furs were sleek and silver and matched his hair. He greeted Dumbledore amicably enough, but it was very obvious that he didn't mean a word. His eyes were too slitted, too calculating and darting around as he took everything in. And his smile didn't at all seem pleased. Rather, he looked like Professor Snape after Gryffindor won a Quidditch match when he was already thinking up all manner of unsavoury ways from them to lose House points.

His students, however, were another story. They gazed at Hogwarts with something bordering on relief, pulling back their hoods and stepping into the light of the front door, and that was when Holly saw him. Viktor Krum. She belatedly remembered hearing that he was still a student, but she'd assumed that he was a mastery student, not a regular one.

From somewhere behind her, she heard Ron Weasley's near-shriek of joy at the realization that his Quidditch hero was among their number. Honestly, it was like the boy had never met someone famous before. Nevertheless, much to her exasperation, a number of other students around her were behaving in a similar manner, searching for quills and parchment and wondering if he would sign an autograph in lipstick.

Except for Slytherin that was. After all, if they'd met one celebrity, it was like knowing them all.

They filed into the Great Hall not long afterwards, and the Hogwarts students immediately went to their House tables. However, their guests lingered by the doors in two distinct groups, uncertain where to go and not comfortable enough to mingle with each other. Finally, the apparent leaders made the decision for them. A slender girl with silvery-blond hair marched off towards the Ravenclaw table with the rest of Beauxbatons trailing in her wake. Durmstrang, following Krum's lead, wandered over to the Slytherin table. Which was coincidentally the furthest from the windows and in the warmest part of the room.

Krum took them to the middle of the table, near where the Quidditch team usually sat. Not that he would know that or anything. The Slytherins exchanged a universal glance before making room, moving to the sides like parting of a sea. An apt description once they noticed the blood red robes peeking out from beneath all the furs. The fourth-years were actually separated by the move with Draco now on one side of the Durmstrang students and Pansy on the other. Holly was seated facing them, Blaise watching with interest from one side and Titania on the other.

Somehow, as though Fate itself was conspiring against her, Holly ended up directly across from Krum. He glanced at her and nodded in greeting before looking away. Only to hesitate as his brain processed what he'd just seen. Then, his head whipped back around as Krum did an actual double take, and his eyes widened for a few seconds before narrowing thoughtfully. He didn't even need to elbow the boy beside him for the others to catch on. They all just looked at her.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what had happened. Besides, Holly had the distinct impression that her scar was visible through her bangs. And she decided to head them off at the pass.

"Hello," she said with as much cheer as she could muster, an unexpected amount.

" 'Ello," Krum returned. "You are Holly Potter, yes?" He asked that as if he couldn't quite believe his eyes, but at least, he wasn't staring.

More like astonished gazing. As though he didn't meet a Dark Lord slayer every day.

"Yes, I am." Then, Holly decided to be a bit wicked. "And you are?"

He blinked before understanding dawned. "Forgive me. I am Viktor Krum."

He reached across the table to take her hand, and she was surprised by the strength of his grip, the tingle of magic that raced across her skin as he touched her. Most men refused to hold on that tightly, and it was a rather refreshing change. He even turned to Titania and Blaise afterwards.

"Blaise Zabini," her friend introduced coolly. "Saw you at the World Cup. Pity that your team lost."

Krum grimaced faintly. "That it was." His attention flickered back to Holly, but he remained silent, fingers drumming against the table.

Holly looked straight back at him. It was hard not to since he was sitting right in front of her and all. She thought that she heard Titania snicker beside her, but the older girl was more interested in the boy next to Krum. He might not be famous like his friend, but his looks more than made up for it, and the way he gazed back at her indicated that her attention was reciprocated.

Krum's focus momentarily flickered to them before going back to Holly.

"See something that interests you," Blaise cut in then. His eyebrow was lifted, and he looked at Krum as one would a naughty child.

He shrugged sheepishly and smiled at Holly. "I apologise. I was not expecting you to be here." He paused for a heartbeat to nibble on his lip. "Or for you to be so--"

If he said young, she might just have to curse him underneath the table.

But whatever Krum would've said was lost as Dumbledore rose to make announcements, and Holly finally realised that there were even more people sitting at the teacher's table than expected, including Percy Weasley's boss and Ludo Bagman. But that flitted away as Dumbledore got down to business and explained the tournament. Holly was more than relieved to learn about the Age Line, a fantastic idea if she had ever heard one, and the Goblet of Fire sounded intriguing. Still, none of it really held her interest since it didn't affect her, and she was rather glad when the headmaster resumed his seat and dinner appeared.

Krum didn't talk much during the meal. He mostly ate and listened to his companions, adding a nod or appropriate response where needed but seemingly content to sit on the sidelines. Holly caught his eye every now and then, but for the most part, she spoke with Blaise and Titania's new friend, Radek. Apparently, he and Krum had known each other since they were very young. A given since their mothers were sisters.

After dinner, Holly and the other girls veered off and headed towards the second floor, where Flitwick had enlarged one of the old teaching halls. Everything was already set up for the sleepover when they entered, and it was very obvious that the Ravenclaw prefects and house-elves had been working overtime. There was a snack table along one wall, already filled with treats. The corners held various games: a place for a Gobstones tournament, another for Exploding Snap and other card games, and a third for miscellaneous things. The centre of the room had several dozen dark sleeping bags arranged in neat lines that would certainly be disarrayed in short order. There was even music floating throughout the area, a fast and exciting tune by the Weird Sisters.

Their group was among the first to arrived, but they were soon joined by the majority of the Slytherin and Ravenclaw girls. There were a number of Hufflepuffs too and even a smattering of Gryffindors. Hermione, however, was not among them. Thankfully, neither was Ginny Weasley.

Holly and Luna spent most of the evening wandering around together. They snacked with Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott before walking off to watch Milli become the Exploding Snap Grand Champion. Afterwards, they even played a few rounds with the Gryffindor Chasers and the Keeper from Ravenclaw. Sophia Dolohov and Blaise's cousin Alé showed them how to magic their fingernails different colours, while a sixth-year prefect from Hufflepuff taught a neat spell to French braid.

There was simply too much going on to participate in all of it. But even with that, Holly couldn't help but feel the pull of sleep after a few hours, and it became very obvious that many of the others were in similar straits. The first and second-years were the first to go, taking over the corner farthest from the door and shoving the Gobstones players elsewhere. The third-years went next and then on up the ranks.

She and Luna curled up near the very middle of the room and just talked to the people around them for a time. Most everyone was interested in the tournament, but it was more the other schools now and not the event itself. In fact, the majority of them were more concerned with Viktor Krum than anything else, and Holly learned more about his apparent godliness and brooding charm than she ever wanted to know.

Yet, soon enough, sleep stopped even that excited chatter. Claiming them one by one. Holly, tired as she was, didn't fall until the end when Flitwick came back to check on them before dispelling the lights. She just caught a glimpse of the diminutive professor, smiling at them from the doorway before darkness descended, and then, she fell into a dreamless and peaceful slumber.

She woke around midmorning instead of her usual time at dawn, but Holly still managed to be one of the first up and about. Luna stirred at her side, her head somehow finding the older girl's shoulder during the night and using it as a makeshift pillow. The two of them inched through the press of bodies between them and the door, deciding to let their friends have a lie-in, before heading off to the Ravenclaw dorms. Holly dropped Luna off there and back-tracked to a short cut that had her at the entrance to Slytherin in mere minutes.

Blaise was waiting for her in the common room when she arrived. He was already up and dressed, and judging by the circles under his eyes, Holly had the distinct impression that he hadn't gotten much sleep. Still, he seemed happy enough to see her, waiting for her to change and take a shower before they headed off to see Tom. The three of them spent a pleasant morning and afternoon flipping through the various books liberated from the Black library before the two fourth-years departed for dinner.

They met up with their year-mates just outside the doors to the Great Hall, and their fellow Slytherins were all too happy to give them the latest gossip. Apparently, the other students of Hogwarts had been very busy in their absence. As had those from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons.

"I watched the lot of them put their names in the Goblet this morning," Theo told them as he sat down across from Greg. "Though I suppose that makes sense. They didn't come all this way just to watch."

"Old news," Milli informed him before turning to Holly. "I heard that Diggory put his name in last night."

"Diggory?" Pansy repeated brightly. "From Hufflepuff? The one with the hair?" She made a motion like she was raking her fingers over her head.

"That's the one." Milli nodded with a wicked smile.

Daphne was intrigued. "Certainly don't have them like that in Slytherin. Tall, blond, and beautiful."

"At least, not since Solaris left," Pansy added, eyes taking on a dreamy cast.

"Hey!" Draco inserted. "We have them quite nicely in Slytherin." He puffed out his chest and smoothed back his hair with one hand.

They ignored him.

Holly thought Diggory was nice to look at but didn't see the appeal. "He's not my type. But he didn't think I was attacking students second year, so he's fine in my book." She shrugged.

Milli's smile turned into a full on smirk. "Oh, we've got your number, Potter. You like them tall, dark, and brooding." She jerked her thumb towards the Krum, who had just walked in the door.

"Not to mention fabulous at Quidditch," Cynthia murmured, idly biting her nail as the Durmstrang students came over.

"And famous," Daphne put in her three Knuts.

Holly just sent her friends a very unamused look. It was seconded by Blaise, who took the opportunity to scoot closer. A wise thing since the seventh-year on the other side of him moved away to make room for the newcomers. Their conversation hit a lull as the feast arrived then, but that was only for it to pick back up again as soon as the food disappeared.

"It's not as if she needs the attention," Draco commented offhandedly. He was more interested in what was going on down front, watching as the Goblet of Fire was taken to the teacher's table.

"Holly already has her own fan club," Pansy insisted. "She hardly needs another one harassing her. And someone else's at that."

Milli snorted. "Already has Creevey the Creeper and Weirdo Weaslette, Hols doesn't need death threats from Krum's fans too, I suppose."

"Creeper and Weirdo?" Daphne questioned. "More like stalkers."

"Or followers," Milli decided. She appropriated a falsely shrill voice. "I'm Holly Potter. And these are my dark followers."

Theo shook his head. “No, no. It’d be more like this. ‘I’m Holly Potter. This is Crony, and that’s Minion.’”

The heavy-set girl chuckled and added, “Behold my mind-bending powers. I will bewitch your mind and ensnare your senses.”

She laughed at her own joke, and sadly, the rest were quick to follow. Even Blaise, that traitor.

“Oh, so very funny.” Holly crossed her arms over her chest.

“I thought so,” Milli replied with a bit of cheer.

“Me, too,” Theo concluded.

Thankfully, Pansy inserted herself before they could go on. “Quiet down. It’s about to start.”

Sure enough, she was right. Dumbledore chose that moment to stand, and quiet spread throughout the hall as he walked up to the Goblet of Fire. Karkaroff and Madame Maxime were solemn behind him, while Bagman and Crouch retained their seats. Dumbledore extinguished the lights in the room with a wave of his wand, and even as they watched, the goblet sparked with blue-white fire. They waited for several minutes with baited breath as the flames flashed red, and suddenly, a paper shot free. Dumbledore swiped it with ease, turning the parchment so that he could read in the dim light.

“The champion for Durmstrang will be Viktor Krum.”

From nearby, Holly could see Krum’s shoulders stiffen before he rose from the table. There was a burst of applause and congratulations as he walked up to the gathered professors and then to the door on the far wall. But that soon quieted as the goblet once more burned red. Another paper burst out, caught by the headmaster’s quick hand.

“The champion for Beauxbatons is Fleur Delacour.”

A silvery-haired girl stood from the Ravenclaw table, shaking her long and silken mane at the cheers following her, most of them from the male population. She strode forward with a light and dancing step, almost conceited with its pleasure. There was something about her movements that reminded Holly of the Veela from the World Cup. Calm self-assurance bordering on arrogance. It didn't help that she resembled them either.

The goblet flared a third time just as the trail end of her robes disappeared through the far door, and Dumbledore snatched the paper before it even had time to fully leave the fire. His voice was just as warm as the last two times, but there was an edge of genuine excitement.

“The Hogwarts champion is Cedric Diggory.”

The noise was almost ear-splitting this time as the entire Hufflepuff table rose together. Poor Cedric had to all but fight them off on his way to the front, and he blushed up to his blond roots when Dumbledore reached forward to both pat his shoulder and shake his head. That only deepened as the old man whispered something in his ear before directing him the same way the others had gone.

The headmaster turned back to the room at large afterwards, dismissing them with a few words. The hall was a cacophony of sound then, people stretching and standing and talking. Holly didn't bother to move. She leaned forward against the table with a contented sigh. Content in the knowledge that all was well. Happy that for once her life was going right, that Halloween wasn't a curse. Satisfied just to lean against Blaise and let the world pass her by.

Only to feel a sudden trickle of dread shoot down her spine. A foreboding chill that ate her from the inside out. A shocking jab of intuition. Her eyes locked with Luna's as both of them sucked in a breath, and Blaise tensed beside her, undoubtedly feeling the echo through their bond. Knowing that something beyond terrible was about to happen.

The Goblet of Fire seemed to have a similar idea. It suddenly went red once more, flames even higher than before, much to the

incredulity of those still in the room. Everyone froze mid-motion, many people in the process of rising or taking another step. And like a death knell, another piece of parchment fired from the goblet and straight towards the headmaster. He plucked it from the air effortlessly, but there was a tension to his movements. His blue eyes were slits behind his half-moon glasses as he unfolded the paper, and his voice was odd. Almost choked.

“Holly Potter.”

And her peaceful, little world shattered.

AN: An update on my birthday, my gift to you. School is hard; breaks are better. I'm already working on the next chapter. Hopefully, it won't take three months this time.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Forty-Five: Black Mail

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Forty-Five: Black Mail

“How could this happen?”

“C’est impossible!”

“Or a vairy unfunny joke perhaps?”

Holly Potter was not amused. Not amused at all. Annoyed worked. Incredibly irritated. Angry even. Furious. Livid.

And her Head of House didn’t seem far behind. If Holly was infuriated, Snape was outright murderous. Most of that biting frost was direct at the other adults in the room. At Bagman, who was practically bouncing in place with excitement. To Crouch, whose face was an unreadable mask but mind was racing. Moody then, suspicious and obviously guarded. Next to Dumbledore, filled with concern and something a lot like regret. Followed by McGonagall, who couldn’t decide if she should be surprised or disgusted by everyone else. Then to Madam Maxime, shocked and a hint fearful. Finally to Karkaroff, all but bursting with the urge to throttle something. Preferably Holly herself.

“Holly,” Dumbledore asked then, voice soft but steely, “did you put your name into the Goblet of Fire.”

Her attention flicked to him, anger abating as he placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “No, headmaster. And I didn’t ask anyone else to do it for me either.”

“Obviously a lie,” Fleur blurted out, hair a whirl behind her as she fought to keep her magic in check. But even the flicker she let loose was enough for Holly to sense that she wasn’t completely human, probably Veela based on her looks.

“Quite,” Karkaroff added. His eyes were slits, full of fury and outright contempt. “But then, teenage girls are hardly known for their honesty. She could’ve very easily snuck down last night and done it herself.”

McGonagall, though she disliked Holly at times, was still not willing to let one of her students be so insulted. "I doubt that very much. You will find that the most of the younger girls were quite indisposed last night."

Madam Maxime was vaguely hesitant next to her champion. "Perhaps someone else did eet for zer," she allowed. "There was an Age Line, yes?"

Karkaroff snorted. "Not that it did much good."

"Dumbly-dorr must 'ave made a mistake wiz ze line then," the large lady concluded.

McGonagall opened her mouth to retort, but Professor Snape beat her to it.

"Or maybe," the Potions master inserted effortlessly, "there is something else at work here. Past tournaments aren't without their share of foibles and missteps. Especially in trying to discredit or shame other contestants. The host school in particular is often targeted."

"Indeed," Crouch agreed with nary a glance at Snape as he moved away from the fireplace. "The last three tournaments before this even had death threats involved. Not to mention something that almost looked like an assassination attempt."

Both Maxime and Karkaroff bristled. Though the former was more due to habit and latter from actual ire.

"Are you suggesting," Karkaroff began, taking a step forward, "that I had something to do with this?"

But it was Moody who answered. "Did you?" he returned evenly, scarred face twisted and menacing. "Your record speaks against you. Sabotage. Leaking information. More than a little misdirection. Diverting attention from yourself by levelling blame at others." He

pointed at Karkaroff accusingly. "Not to mention that contestants are known to die. It would be very easy to get rid of Potter here and make it look like an accident. You don't seem to like her very much, a given with your past associates."

The Durmstrang headmaster stood up straighter. "I was cleared of any and all accusations." His hand twitched, as though wishing it held a wand.

"No, we just decided not to prosecute," the ex-Auror replied with a dark smirk. "There is a difference. You'd think that the headmaster of a school would be smart enough to figure that out."

"I do not like your tone, professor," Karkaroff shot back. "You need to show respect for your betters."

"I will when I see one," Moody scoffed with a bark-like chuckle. "But I don't think Dumbledore and the madam will mind this one time."

Karkaroff inhaled deeply, nostrils flaring. The others in the room simply watched the exchange like a two Chasers with a Quaffle, unsure of what to think or if they should even get involved. The two French witches had drawn closer together, Maxime slightly out front as though taking a defensive stance. Krum and Snape had both drifted nearer to Holly and Dumbledore, out of the direct line of fire. While McGonagall was now beside Cedric, ready to pull him back if need be. Bagman hadn't moved at all, not quite recognising the tension in the room.

"Perhaps, gentlemen," Crouch inserted, drawing between them. "We should get back to the matter at hand. And deal with this later. In private." One of his hands was a fist, the other hovering by his wand holster.

Thankfully though, Moody just sniffed and stepped back. Lingered in the shadows of the room where he could keep Karkaroff easily in sight.

“Thank you, Barty,” McGonagall said with a nod. “Now, what exactly will we do? Continue on the tournament? Or can we cancel it and light the goblet again?”

Crouch was shaking his head. “We can’t cancel the tournament or even change the tasks that we already agreed on. The contracts each school signed are very binding. There is no way to back out other than injury or death, and the consequences to the students themselves would be enormous. This is very old magic. Very old and very powerful magic.”

Dumbledore inclined his head. “Once the names are entered, the contract takes hold. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding the entry.” His face was pinched, obviously trying to scour his brain for a way to get them out of this mess.

“But we still do not know ’ow zis little girl was even entered,” Fleur interrupted with a wave in Holly’s direction. “Very convenient for zer, non? Getting to compete no matter what? ’aving no way to back out once zer name came out?”

“We’ve been over this,” Professor Snape responded sharply. “Miss Potter has already said she did not put her name in nor did she have someone else do it for her.”

“But ’ow can we believe zer?” Fleur went on like she hadn’t heard him.

Madam Maxime nodded beside her, unhappy but with her face set. “It is ’ighly irregular. ’ogwarts wiz two competitors and one of them ze Girl-Who- Lived.”

There was a universal glance around the room. Dumbledore’s eyes were narrowed behind his half-moon spectacles, and Snape had his arms crossed over his chest, standing close enough to Holly that their robes brushed. McGonagall was frowning, lips a thin line. Cedric and Krum, who had both been quiet to this point remained so, ostensibly content to let things play out. Bagman seemed rather put out and confused at the same time, clearly not smart enough to follow along.

Crouch just bit the inside of his lip, moustache quivering. Karkaroff gave a very insincere smile, while Moody shot him a distrustful look.

“I believe that I have a solution to that,” Holly interjected then and held her wand up to her heart before anyone could stop her. “I swear on my magic and my life that I did not enter this tournament. Nor did I ask or wilfully enable anyone else to do it for me.”

The air tightened around her, and she could feel the prickle of power race across her skin. Holly didn't have to look at everyone to know their reactions. Surprise would be putting it lightly. She'd just put her entire future on the line. At least to them. Holly, however, knew that it was a sure bet.

“Lumos,” she called, and when her wand lit up, she gave a cold grin. “See? Still have my magic. And I'm obviously still alive.”

Holly glanced up then, gaze flickering around the room and daring them to comment, to call her a liar again. Even a hundred years ago, duels to the death had been fought over less, and she knew enough about family honour and personal reputations to know that she had truly been insult indeed. Had her parents or Sirius been here – the latter of which would undoubtedly show up sometime tomorrow once he heard – they could've easily given challenge or called the others out. Holly was still considered underage though, and the last of her line to boot. Things were different when one was both head-in-waiting and heir-apparent.

Nonetheless, her expression alone would've been enough to quiet them, even without her earlier display. Dumbledore was stiff beside her as she looked at him, but his eyes were twinkling like mad, full of pride. Karkaroff all but sneered at her, while Madam Maxime's face was impassive but vaguely relieved. Bagman's eyebrows were nearly even with his hairline, and Moody was too busy smirking, even as Crouch was caught between rolling his eyes and having an aneurysm. Fleur looked haughty and unruffled, like usual then. Cedric was grinning, and Krum... Krum was watching her with something a lot like admiration. He even inclined his head when he noticed her attention.

But that was perhaps the lone bright point in the next thirty minutes. While the others now agreed that Holly hadn't entered willingly, they still argued over whether she should actually compete. However, a swift check by Dumbledore – that was repeated by both Crouch and Maxime – it became very obvious that the magical contract was still binding on her. From there, Karkaroff demanded that the goblet be relit, an impossibility until the next tournament. Nor would the contract accept any other submissions. Even if they asked two more students to join in, there was no possible way for them to be declared the victor. The magic simply wouldn't allow it. Never mind that no one with any sense would compete in something like this knowing that they had no chance to win.

In the end, Holly was obligated to participate, while Durmstrang and Beauxbatons would just have to deal with only having one champion. No one was truly happy with the situation, least of all Holly herself. And she had to redouble her mental shields as Bagman gave them what scant information he could about the first task. Apparently, it was supposed to test their daring and the challenge of the unknown.

Even Cedric looked sceptical about that one.

Fleur stomped off as soon as they were dismissed, the air crackling around her. Madam Maxime lingered, however, joining the other two headmasters for a nightcap. Which probably meant that Dumbledore would be doing his utmost to reassure them. Moody went to go study the goblet for tampering, while Crouch and Bagman left together, though really the former was dragging the latter out with him. Cedric stayed for a few minutes and attempted small talk with Holly, but it was rather clear that he felt out of sorts, departing after an awkward goodbye. That left only Holly herself with the two remaining professors. And Krum of course, though he didn't seem in any hurry to leave.

"I will escort you back to the dorms, Miss Potter," her Head of House said after a few seconds. "We wouldn't want anything unfortunate to happen to you along the way." But he paused then, eyes flickering over to McGonagall who clearly wanted a word with him. "Please wait here until I return." He followed after the older woman, stepping into a side room.

And suddenly, Holly was left with only Krum. She wasn't concerned, however, merely weary and a bit intrigued as he turned to her.

"I am sorry you were dragged into this," he commented with ample sincerity. "And I apologise on behalf of my headmaster. He should not have said such things."

Holly blinked, rather taken aback. "You don't have to do that," she responded. "It isn't your fault."

"It is not yours either," Krum pointed out. "And he should have better manners."

She wasn't quite certain what to say to that and remained quiet. Krum didn't seem bothered by this. He simply tilted his head and wished her a goodnight before leaving just as Professor Snape walked over.

The trip back to the dorms was made in silence. This was not a good place and time to be discussing things, something both Slytherins knew and understood. Besides, the Potions master appeared to be in deep thought, and Holly herself was just too tired. Which was probably why she gaped rather stupidly at what was waiting for her when she went through the portrait entrance.

All of Slytherin. From the tiniest first-year – who still managed to be the same height as Holly – to the tallest of the seventh-year boys. They were simply gathered in the common room. Squashed into every available chair or sofa. Piled onto the low tables. Leaning against one another on the floor. A scant few of the younger students were even lying down, curled up together, ostensibly asleep.

And as one every open eye in the entire room flicked to Holly and the professor as they walked in. The sleeping students were quickly nudged to consciousness, a slight bit addled but swiftly catching on. Also staring as one minute stretched into the next and Snape's eyebrow cocked in an expression of absolute wonder mixed with pride. After all, he realised exactly what this was. Not a confrontation. But a show of solidarity. A silent proclamation of support.

They just stood there for a moment, Holly's exhausted brain attempting to process as her eyes flickered around. Finding Blaise with his subtle smile. Then Draco and his fierce nod. Milli's firm resolve. Theo giving a little wave. Luna who had snuck in with Gavin. Pansy and Daphne. Greg and Vince. Cynthia and Autumn. Titania and the Quidditch team. All the prefects.

All of them there. Not saying a thing but quiet speaking volumes.

"Go on to bed, Miss Potter," Snape finally instructed her. "There are several things I wish to discuss with the House at large." He gave her shoulder a light squeeze before directing her forward.

She hesitated and then took a slow step followed by another. Slytherins parted before her like the clouds around a mountain, moving out of her way and then back together in her wake. Blaise caught her hand as she passed by his position on the arm of a sofa, but he didn't stop her as she went by. Just a quick squeeze and release. No one else even touched her as she walked to the far door, though she all knew they were watching.

Holly slipped into the hallway, the door shutting behind her, and loitered for a time with her back to it. She could just hear her Head of House's voice through the thick wood. But his words were indistinguishable, and she honestly didn't care at this point. The girl just continued on to her own room, undressing and slipping into bed before her mind had even caught up with her. She was out within seconds of her head touching her pillow, and if anyone came to check on her during the night, she was too far gone to even notice.

Her sleep was deep and thankfully dreamless.

Sirius was there when she woke, sitting on the edge of her bed in his Padfoot-form. Holly could guess how he'd gotten by the protections layered on the doors and hallways since they didn't register animals as a threat. Yet, that fluttered away as her sleepy mind caught up with her. She hadn't thought to send him a letter the night before, though she most likely would have today. Which meant that someone else had done it for her.

“Hey,” he said as he resumed his normal shape, handing Holly her glasses from the bedside table. “How are you?”

“Fine,” she replied automatically, but she squirmed under his knowing gaze. “I’ll be fine. Eventually.” Her chest felt tight as she looked at him. “I swear that I didn’t--”

“I know,” Sirius effectively cut her off. “Dumbledore told me all about it last night.” He brushed a soft hand through her hair, but she could feel him faintly tremble. Though whether it was from nerves or something else, Holly couldn’t tell.

“Last night?” she asked instead.

“He fire-called me as soon as he got back to his office,” the Animagus informed her. “Remus and me came right over.”

“Remus?” Holly started to question before the rest of what he said registered. “Wait. You were here last night?”

If he was surprised by the excitement in her tone, he didn’t show it. “You were already asleep by the time we were done. Dumbledore put us up in one of the guestrooms.”

The Slytherin blinked as she thought that over. “Where’s Remus then?”

“He went back to the house,” Sirius responded after a second. “He didn’t think it would be a good idea for him to be seen wandering the castle with the whole werewolf thing.”

She snorted. “Not like any of the students would care.”

“But the French and Karkaroff might,” her godfather was quick to point out. “Crouch about had an aneurysm with just me here.”

Holly could just imagine that. “I bet he was thrilled last night. He looked ready to jump across the room at me.” She exhaled then, long

and slow. Thoughts turning over the events of the evening previous. "How could this happen?" she questioned with a small voice. "I mean, wasn't anyone watching the goblet? Making sure that nobody tampered with it?"

"I don't know, pup." Sirius rubbed a hand over his face. "Dumbledore said that he didn't have anyone watching it because he didn't want to embarrass the students. Most people won't enter if they know others are watching them do it. As for the cup itself, he has Moody investigating. If there's anything to find, Mad-Eye will find it. That's a guarantee."

Holly didn't respond. She just watched him for a few heartbeats, and something of the chaos inside must have shown through since Sirius reached forward.

"We'll get through this." He rubbed her shoulder encouragingly. "I promise that everything will work out. You'll see." He smiled at her, and though sad, it managed to reach his eyes. "Understand?"

"Yes." She swallowed by the lump in her throat.

"Good," he commented with more of his normally jovial tone. "Now, get dressed."

The only reply she gave was a sharp nod. But he seemed to understand, pulling back.

Sirius went down to the common room as she dressed and was sitting on the sofa by the fire when she entered. Looking like the proverbial dog in the dragon's den. Eyeing the decor like he wanted to be impressed but couldn't bring himself to be anything but agitated. The fact that the few early risers up and about were giving him curious looks probably didn't help matters. She briefly considered going to get Blaise or just waiting for him, but Holly dismissed that almost as quickly as she thought it. She really just needed some time with Sirius right now. Just the two of them.

They left the common room without speaking, but instead of heading up to the Great Hall, he directed her to the kitchens. Nice and mostly private, and as long as they didn't set fire to anything, the house-elves wouldn't care that they were there. Plus, the little creatures were known for their discretion and wouldn't be spreading any rumours. Most of them there were the same ones who had helped Sirius get the house ready over the summer anyway, and they were very happy to see him, all but dancing around his feet before directing them to a table and going to fetch breakfast.

They ate in relative silence. Holly was just glad to have him there, though her mind was scattered and distracted. Sirius, on the other, simply studied her across the table, eyes narrowed in concentration. Almost like he was making in plans in his head or was plotting out what exactly to say to her. Holly had the feeling that most of it wouldn't be good.

She was only partially right.

"Look," Sirius began once the house-elves had taken away their plates and he had cast every privacy spell known to wizardkind and several he had probably just made up on the spot, "I know that you didn't ask for this, and quite frankly, I'm glad that you didn't enter at all. But Remus and I talked it through last night with Dumbledore. There's just no way we could think of to get you out of this."

Holly exhaled all in a rush. "I figured as much," she admitted. "I hoped differently, but I'm not shocked. If there was a way, Dumbledore would've let us know. Not to mention that Maxime and Karkaroff would have jumped at the opportunity."

"I'm sorry, Holly. I really am." Her godfather reached for her hand, which was slowly curling into a fist. "But you just have to show up. You don't actually have to do the tasks. The minimal effort involved. A single spell and say that was your attempt."

The Slytherin shook her head, however. "You know I can't do that Sirius. It's not in me to be a quitter, and if anything, that will reflect badly on both me and my House. Not to mention the school at large."

He was quiet for a moment, just watching her face. Taking in the tilt of her head. The way her breath was even and deep but somehow different than normal. The fiery glint to her eyes and the resolute lift of her chin.

“You want to win,” Sirius accused then. “You don’t want to do it just for the school. You want to win for yourself.”

“Yes,” she replied in earnest, as if daring him to disagree. “I want to win. I want to rub it in their faces. To show them up. To be a fourth-year against senior students and beat them still. Someone got me in to this. Undoubtedly to hurt or even kill me--”

“But you want to show them that something like a measly little tournament can’t take down Holly Potter.” His voice was serious, but there was an undertone of interest to it. Of satisfaction and outright pride.

“Absolutely,” the girl affirmed. “Backing down. Doing it the easy way will certainly get me through this. But what about the next time? Or the one after that? As long as they think I’m weak, as long as they think it will be easy, they’ll keep trying. And they’ll do it in a way that is hard to trace back.”

“You want to draw them out. Find out who did it,” Sirius said with sudden understanding. “That could certainly work. You’d need to be careful about it. Cautious with who you let into your plans. Especially for the tasks.”

“My friends have proven trustworthy,” Holly pointed out, glad that he hadn’t dismissed her idea out of hand. But then, Sirius Black wasn’t exactly known for backing down from anything.

“They have,” the man conceded, “but you know that they don’t even have to intentionally give the information away. There are ways to snatch it right from their minds.”

She did know. Telepathy. Legilimency. Imperius if someone were desperate or driven enough. Veritaserum. And at least a dozen other methods.

“Very true.” Holly drummed the fingers of her free hand on the tabletop, even as he squeezed the other.

Sirius nodded. “Tell them but keep it simple and direct. What someone else could easily figure out on their own. A little misdirection won’t hurt. Particularly if you get them to spread some misinformation around. Be mostly honest about why you can’t tell them, and they’ll understand. They might not necessarily like it, but they will understand.”

He paused then as he viewed their problem from several angles. Taking it all in and twisting it around in his head. Sirius was many things, but stupid really wasn’t one of them. And thanks to his Auror training he had a mind for tactics and seeing things from a perspective that she wouldn’t immediately consider. Not so much a lack on her part as the experience that came with age.

“Only be really free with Blaise and Luna,” the Animagus decided seconds later. “Tom, too. I doubt that anyone will see him coming. He can easily help you with the tasks with no one the wiser. And you are getting help,” Sirius interjected before she could voice any dissent, not that she would. “I know that this is supposed to test the students, but Dumbledore is the only one who won’t be leading his through. And I’ll not allow him to hang you out to dry. You can bet all my money in Gringotts that Karkaroff and Maxine are all but doing the tasks for their students. And Amos Diggory is probably coaching his son. Dumbledore may want to play honestly, but I won’t let you be hurt or killed because of his high-handed morals.”

Her godfather leaned forward then, snagging her other hand. He just looked at her for a long minute, as if trying to impart everything he couldn’t say.

“If you really want to do this, and I mean really want to compete and win, you’ll need help. It isn’t anything against you, Holly,” he assured

her rapidly, “but the tasks were designed for someone nearly done with school. For people with mature magic. It’s going to be difficult and dangerous.”

She sighed. “I understand, and I honestly wasn’t planning on doing it all myself. I’m not an idiot.”

“I never said you were,” Sirius replied with the ghost of a wink. “But I know about Potter pride. Lily herself wasn’t immune. And even regular Slytherins seem to have it in spades.”

Holly snorted. “I’m not about to let my pride get me killed. I like living quite a lot actually.”

“True. However, asking for help isn’t always easy. Especially not for you sometimes.” He tilted his head but kept looking at her.

“Oh, you’re one to talk about getting help. You aren’t exactly known for it either,” she redirected, but it was lacking heat. More playful than accusatory. A chance to relax and drift away from the whole tournament mess.

“I’m trying though,” Sirius admitted, gracious enough to let her change of subject go. “I really am.”

“You mean the thing with Saint Mungo’s? The Mind Healers?” she clarified. “I really do think they’re helping.” Holly exhaled slowly. “I know you’re going there for more than that though. Healer’s training, right? That’s why you are there all the time.”

The man blinked at her in surprise. “Figured that out, did you? I thought it would take a bit longer.” He shrugged. “But yeah. I had enough time and experience in as a field medic to opt out of most of the required three years. Just some refresher stuff to get me back to speed and a year to complete an internship.”

“I’m happy for you, Sirius,” Holly responded with utmost sincerity. “I think that you’ll make a good Healer.”

And she truly did. Her godfather did seem to have a knack for it. Healing the damage done to him in Azkaban with the professionalism and care to detail that would've put Pomfrey to shame. Not to mention patching up Holly and her friends after several of their duels the year before and teaching them some of the basics in the process. Sirius had been an Auror during the war, and if even half of what Remus told her was true, he'd been brilliant at it. He had been invited back by Scrimgeour but had declined, not wanting anything to do with the current Ministry. This would be a good opportunity for him, a chance to explore his interests outside of duelling and curses. It also would let him exercise more than a bit of his own Mind Magic; Sirius was quite a strong empath in his own rights, something that he had revealed to her a few months previous.

Nevertheless, she could see why he would be hesitant. Healing was not a suitable career for the heir of the Black family, something that had probably been drilled into his head since birth. Being an Auror wasn't much better, but it was a way to get back at his parents, and it did fit with his projected persona. The reckless bad boy who was daring and fearless. Healers as a whole were rather compassionate and understanding. Sensitive to moods and magic. This would be tacitly admitting that he was those things. That he was more than the mask he presented to the world.

He released her hand to rub the back of his head. "Yeah, well... It was what I was going to do after the war anyway," he admitted. "I was already doing this sort of apprenticeship with Pomfrey during my downtime, and Mungo's is going to count that towards my education. They did that for a couple of people during the war. That's how my cousin Andy got her credentials."

She thought that over for a few seconds before giving a firm nod. "I'm glad," she said simply.

Sirius smiled, and they sat there for several moments. Just enjoying the quiet between them and the backdrop of elves scurrying to and fro. Content to take a breath and relax before diving back in.

"We will get through this," he stated after a time, tone full of conviction. "I promise."

For some strange reason, it was hard to find her voice. "I know." She sounded genuine as she could make herself. "We will."

Nevertheless, Holly had the feeling that things wouldn't be that easy.

Saying things at Hogwarts were tense over the next few weeks was an understatement of epic proportions. The air was virtually charged with the undercurrent of energy the days following the incident with the goblet and Dumbledore's proclamation of her innocence. He even mentioned in great detail her binding oath on the matter, though people were still clearly sceptical. She was Holly Potter, after all; people tended to be very polarised with their opinions about her. She was either hero or attention-seeking prat, and even after Cedric explained that he believed Holly, half the school still glared their way through meals. Whispered about her in the corridors as she walked by. Or made general arses of themselves.

Ravenclaw took things in stride for the most part. Holly was popular among that House, and she had several witnesses among them who could easily verify her whereabouts the night in question. Flitwick also kept them in check, firmly quashing any rumours or slights against her.

Neville and the twins, on the other hand, were among the few Gryffindors still on speaking terms. That number included Adair Darklighter and the other first-years, the rest of the Quidditch team, Ginny Weasley, and the two Creevey brothers. To be fair, it was entirely possible that Hermione and Ron would talk to her, but Holly didn't exactly go out of her way to see them most days and unconsciously avoided them the rest. Force of habit, she supposed.

Hufflepuff was – if anything – worse. Only Cedric himself, Susan Bones, and Autumn's little brother Indian acknowledged her existence. Even Sprout was distant and had taken to ignoring her in Herbology and in the hallways, where she had always been friendly before. Draco thought it rather plebian and petty of her, especially since she was an adult and supposedly a professional. However, Holly could rather understand her stance and the fact that Hufflepuff's limelight had once more been usurped. It wasn't her fault, but they

needed someone to blame. She just happened to make a convenient target.

Then, of course, there were the badges circulating the school. Ones that declared Cedric Diggory as Hogwarts real champion. Followed by the ever witty "Potter Stinks." No one knew who had originally made them, although Holly could hazard a few guesses. Blaise seemed to take them as a direct challenge, personally affronted on her behalf. Sticking to her side like a rather tenacious guard dog and going with her everywhere save the loo, where he would thankfully wait outside the door.

Her friends took up a similar vein. Milli was more outwardly aggressive than Blaise, telling her fellow students exactly what they could do with themselves and using a few choice spells to get the point across. Luna was more subdued about it but was a calm and supporting presence at her side. Draco was equal parts haughty and sympathetic, using his Malfoy charm and breeding to smooth over things with the rest of the school in a slow but steady pace. He even managed to get Ernie Macmillan to admit that Holly was a human being and not Dementor spawn. It also didn't hurt that he'd contacted his father about the mess and that the elder Malfoy was putting his best spin on the story for the outside world.

If only Hogwarts were so easily convinced.

But they weren't the only ones working their magic. Tom was still researching how to extract himself from his diary, though he did promise to help her with the tasks in the future. Not that they could do much at the moment since they didn't even know what the first one was. But he was rather insistent on eye-related magic to free her from her dependence on glasses, and he'd actually found several potions that were promising, albeit difficult to make. Yet, with Sirius' training in medi-magic, things might be doable in the near future.

And if Snape had been homicidal about this mess, Erendiria Zabini was frothing at the bit. While she wasn't technically Holly's guardian anymore, their foster relationship was still perfectly valid. Meaning that she was well within her rights to march down to the school and lay into Dumbledore with a ferocity that would do Molly Weasley

proud. After that verbal lashing was done, she took Holly aside in what was essentially a reiteration of the earlier conversation with Sirius. The Zabini matriarch was less than pleased with the entire situation, but she understood Holly's reasoning and supported her. Only making her promise to stay close to Blaise and the others and to do her best to be safe. Of course, she also wrung out an agreement on Holly's part to be kept posted about everything. And when she said everything, Eren really meant everything. Undoubtedly aided and abetted by Snape and her son to see it through.

Still, Hogwarts wasn't the only school with a stake in the matter. The group from Beauxbatons once they had settled took the news of her circumstances with a disdainful and snobby air. To be expected of a school that had a part-Veela would-be princess as their champion. Durmstrang, however, was much more low-key about the affair, taking their cue from Krum and not their headmaster. It didn't hurt that a number of Slytherins had ties to the school as a whole or that they were sharing a table in the Great Hall. Or the fact that Krum sat near her during meals and even occasionally spoke to her. They genuinely believed her story and were more intrigued by it than anything.

Even with all that in mind, to be perfectly honest, the worst thing about this whole fiasco was actually the mail. Her mail. The dozens if not hundreds of letters she got. Fan mail. Hate mail. Confusing mail. Downright creepy mail, all of which was forwarded to her Head of House who had the pleasure of notifying both Sirius and Eren.

And still, the letters kept on coming. Congratulations. Damnations. Howlers, which were quickly destroyed before they could explode on their own. Even a few marriage proposals. Requests for interviews. Requests for audiences. Requests for autographs. Gifts. Curses disguised as gifts. Things she wishes were curses since that would've been preferable.

The good – if it could be called that – still outweighed the bad, most likely due to Lucius Malfoy's hard work, but it was all still thoroughly annoying. Disgusting. Disheartening. And made Holly wonder why she had never gotten so much mail like this before. She'd have to ask the headmaster about that.

This was only tip of the iceberg. Or so she thought.

Of course, Holly was proven right at the weighing of the wands. It was an event she had expected, one that traditionally took place before the first task according to several books she and her year-mates had pilfered from the library. And it did serve to get her out of Potions with the Gryffindors. There was only so much of Seamus Finnegan's evil eye that she could stand.

However, that was the lone bright point of the whole debacle. If it wasn't Rita Skeeter trying to get her in a closet for an interview – or possible child molestation – it was Karkaroff and Fleur Delacour glaring daggers at her through the entire thing. Cedric, of course, was friendly but very overwhelmed throughout the whole thing, and Krum took to lurking next to her in the shadows like a mostly silent but highly effective sentinel. He certainly managed to keep Skeeter and Bagman away with just a glance and a lift of his eyebrow.

The actual wand weighing went off without a hitch since Holly took rather good care of hers and also because Ollivander was kind enough not to mention its relation to Voldemort. The pictures following that took almost until dinner since the photographer couldn't decide how to arrange them all, much to everyone's increasing annoyance. Skeeter again attempted to lasso her afterward, but Holly deflected by saying that she wasn't allowed to speak to any reporters without her guardian present. The buggy woman's quill practically curled up and ran for cover with that one. Skeeter and Sirius weren't exactly on speaking terms, not after her repeated attempts for an Azkaban exposé or her articles about Remus and his little furry problem at the end of the last school year.

Holly honestly sometimes wondered if Fate or the Maker were out to get her and everyone she knew. Perhaps guilt by association for the later.

Yet, even with the tournament and all its woes, life still went on.

Daphne learned that her mother planned to marry her current paramour, a rather pleasant older gentlemen with grown children of his own. The girl seemed excited about it, having lost her birth father

at a young age, and promised them all invitations to the wedding that was to take place sometime after school let out in June.

Classes continued. Trelawney still predicted her death, while McGonagall actually acted slightly affable towards her. Rosetta and Vector were the same, more interested in their subjects than the school gossip, something Holly appreciated. Moody carried on as he had before, paranoid but very well-versed in his field. Professor Snape was pleasant to her. Well, as pleasant as he ever got. And Flitwick was his usual bright and cheerful self, awarding her twenty points for her successful showing of the Summoning spell. A nice touch since Holly initially had some sort of block for them when they'd practiced them in their study group.

All told, the only one who was actually excited about her life as it was and her place in the tournament was Hagrid. The enormous man was thrilled for her, thinking it an excellent opportunity for her to show her mettle. Things like death and danger didn't really faze him. Or even occur to him for the most part. Nor did rules, regulations, or the fact that she wasn't supposed to know about the first task at all.

But that didn't stop him from inviting her down to his hut just days before. With firm instructions to bring both Blaise and her Invisibility cloak.

And with a note like that, how could Holly possibly resist?

AN: I'm finally off for the summer, so hopefully, I'll be getting a few more chapters out.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Forty-Six: Year of the Dragon

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Forty-Six: Year of the Dragon

“Dragons!” Blaise whispered heatedly, forgetting himself for a moment.

It wasn't like anyone would overhear him, ensconced in the hidden passageways off the Slytherin dorms as they were. He and Holly had only just come back from Hagrid's little bit of show-and-tell and hadn't been able to wait for the next morning. They'd gone immediately to gather everyone, not that it had been hard to find them since they were still where Holly and Blaise had left them. Playing an Exploding Snap tournament, which Gavin was winning apparently. But he like everyone else could only gape in a stunned sort of shock. Like watching a broom crash and being unable to look away.

“Dragons,” Theo repeated with very wide eyes. “Honestly?”

“Yes,” Holly answered, leaning in and gesturing viciously. “There's one for each of us – the champions. Nesting mothers is what we heard Charlie Weasley say, and we're only allowed to bring our wands. Nothing else.”

Tom made a low humming noise as he rubbed a hand over his chin. “That's not good. Not good at all. Those are the most vicious kind,” he explained at their looks of incomprehension, eyes narrowed and clearly considering.

“It's because of their eggs,” Gavin elaborated with a vague sense of interest and enthusiasm. “The need to defend their young. They're known to kill even groups of wizards who get too close.” He subsided at the almost-glances sent his way and fidgeted slightly.

There was a universal shudder, and Holly had a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. She'd been numb since she had seen the dragons and had probably only made it back to the castle because Blaise had been more functional. Though to be honest, he hadn't been in better shape, mind instantly going to all the ways this could

go terribly, horribly wrong. And all in the name of this damn tournament.

There were several minutes of uneasy silence.

“But dragons?” Milli finally asked from her spot beside Gavin. “Real dragons? Not just spells or illusions?”

Holly could only nod. Words seemed to have failed her. Washed away in the wake of realising that the headmaster really was as senile and mad as people often accused. He would have to be to agree to do this.

“That’s insane! Completely crazy,” Draco said then, shaking his head. “You can’t possibly be serious.”

“He’s not Sirius. Sirius isn’t here right now,” Luna chimed in.

Draco shot her a look.

“No, but he will be the instant he learns of this,” Milli inserted with absolute certainty.

Pansy nodded on her other side, and there was a murmur of assent to the statement. Followed by a few yawns.

“Well,” Theo went on after a second, “at least he only has three more days to worry about it. I mean, the first task is Tuesday afternoon. That is not a lot of time to come up with a plan of attack, and I’m not sure the spells we’ve been practicing will do much good against a dragon.”

Even more agreement. And everyone paused to think that over. Yet, they didn’t get much farther than that. They were all just too tired for it. Just stared at each other as time ticked on. Yawning and blinking sleepily as their brains strained to even stay awake. Holly and Blaise seemed to be in the best shape outside of Tom, but they were both too busy worrying to think logically.

It seemed things were going to continue on in that vein. Until finally, Milli just stood and motioned the others to follow her lead. It didn't take much to get them to do so. But Tom sent out a mental nudge then and caught Holly's eye in a wordless request for her to stick around. Blaise also noticed, hanging back. Milli, who had been saying her goodnights to Gavin and Theo, turned to Holly then. But she and the others were waved along.

"Go on," Holly said as she rubbed an exhausted hand across her forehead. "I'm just going to stay and talk with Blaise some. I'll be back later."

Milli studied her for a second before abruptly yawning for the third time in a row. "If you like. I'll see you in the morning."

She and most of the others departed, all of them too tired to argue. Draco and Luna, however, both lingered, swaying and leaning against each other. That was until Tom took his wand and cast an odd little charm at them. They both started and whirled to look at him wide-eyed. Tom smirked and offered the same for Holly and Blaise, who wisely turned him down. His smirk slipped away then, and his gaze flickered to the open door, which Draco quickly closed with his wand. Tom hesitated for a few seconds, hand lingering over his robes before he slowly reached in his inner pocket and pulled out what appeared to be a normal mirror. He held it out for them to see.

"Er... What is it?" Blaise asked with a glance at his friends.

"A shortcut," Tom replied enigmatically. His mouth curled up at the corners.

"To what?" Holly questioned, eyebrow lifting.

"Contacting Sirius, of course," Tom added. "He has the matching one."

Holly turned that over in her sleep-deprived brain. "A mirror. That you can contact Sirius through," she summarised.

“Yes.” Tom gave a jaunty nod at their dumbfounded expressions.

She wanted to ask why he had it. Why Sirius had given it to him. However, even though she was tired, Holly still had enough processing power to come up with a couple reasons on her own.

Instead, she asked, “How long have you had this?” There wasn’t anger in her tone. More like curiosity.

Tom didn’t seem the least bit sheepish as he answered, “Since September.” He lifted his head to glance at the ceiling. “Sirius and I talked a lot last year.”

That sentence both was and wasn’t an explanation. Sirius and Tom had spent quite a bit of time together while she and the others were in class or otherwise away, so it wasn’t all that surprising that they would want to do so now. Still, it was odd in a way. Especially since the Animagus didn’t know of Tom’s connection with Voldemort yet. Unless he had told Sirius and she had missed it. Which she really doubted. Sirius wouldn’t have been able to keep quiet about that one. At least, not without first talking her ear off about it.

Holly sighed at that. It really wasn’t any of her business either way, but it was yet another thing added to her list of potential problems. Something to be dealt with when she didn’t have dragons lurking in her thoughts.

And it was at that point Holly realised she had been quiet for too long. Coming back to herself to see them watching her pointedly.

“Er...”

“How nice for you,” Luna commented then and effectively cut Holly off.

“Yes,” the older girl quickly agreed, doing her utmost to seem sincere.

Tom gave her a sceptical look but just pretended everything was fine as he turned the mirror over in his hands. Holly could feel a tingle of magic as he spread his fingers over the surface and then called out Sirius' name. He answered faster than she would've thought possible, but then, her godfather didn't usually go to bed before midnight unless he had to go to Saint Mungo's in the morning. Sirius just blinked at Tom through the glass and then the group as a whole as Tom moved the mirror to show them. But that look of confusion swiftly dissipated as he was brought up to speed, and his face set in a grim line as it started to sink in.

"Dragons," he said after a moment, "we can do. Tricky. But doable."

Beside her, Holly heard Blaise exhale in a rush. "How?" he questioned. "Stunners? Some kind of spell to their eyes?"

"Not Stunners," the man answered readily. "But spells to the eyes could definitely work. Have to be careful though. That could just make the dragon mad. Which would be very bad." A finger appeared in the glass, tapping on his lips.

"Does she have to magic the dragon directly?" Tom inquired, casting a spell that allowed the mirror to hover midair where they could all easily see it.

"Not according to Hagrid," Holly put in. "I just have to get an egg from it. I suppose that I could try spelling the ground. Some sort of block or barrier to keep it away long enough for me to get it."

"It'd have to be an awfully strong barrier," Draco inserted as he leaned forward slightly. "You wouldn't have more than a few seconds."

Luna hummed to herself. "You could try making herself faster then."

"Again, how?" Blaise ran a hand through his hair. "What kind of spell could she use for that? Would it be quick enough for her to not need to block the dragon?"

Sirius snapped his fingers in the mirror. “Just one spell. That’s all she’ll need. A Summoning spell.” His eyes sought Holly.

However, she truly must have been tired. Or maybe it just wasn’t her night because she just didn’t follow.

“What am I summoning?” Holly inquired very wearily.

“Your broom, Holly,” her godfather replied with emphasis. “Your broom. You can use your wand to summon your broom.”

They just stared at him. His little mirrored self glanced around at their gaping expressions, seeming mildly put out.

“It could work,” he assured with a shake of his head. “It would work. She’d be mobile and faster than the dragon. It would be just like going for the Snitch.”

“That could actually work,” Tom allowed. He looked to Holly. “You should be strong enough to summon it all the way from the castle. I mean, if you can run off a hundred Dementors, that should be child’s play.”

There was a pause as they all thought that over. But Luna – wonderful and brilliant Luna – had a slight modification.

“Summon your broom? Why don’t you just summon the egg?” the blonde asked.

“I...” Holly began, but she suddenly paused as she considered. “That’s actually a really good idea,” she concluded.

“It is,” Tom agreed as he crossed his arms over his chest. “You’d just have to distract the dragon enough to get in a clean shot at it. Something to make it move out of the way.”

“Like a spell to make it rise up on its hind-legs,” Blaise added, mind quickly recognising the possibilities.

“What if there are enchantments on the egg?” Draco questioned then. “I mean, they might have anticipated someone doing just that.”

“It won’t hurt to try,” Sirius countered over the mirror.

They jumped. Honestly having forgotten that he was still there.

“And even if it can’t be summoned,” the Animagus continued, “Holly can still try for her broom. Besides, if she got the dragon to lift up a bit, then she can just zoom in and get the egg.”

They debated the merits of that plan for a few minutes, but that soon gave way to the tournament in general and if Sirius had learned anything further from Moody and Dumbledore about how Holly had been entered. He hadn’t, though he had picked up some other news from Arthur Weasley and a cousin of his who was apparently a trainee Auror. The Ministry was in an uproar over the disappearance of a witch from Ludo Bagman’s department during the summer, notable only due to the fact that she had been in Albania at the time, Voldemort’s last known location. Based on the woman’s description, she fit Holly’s rather vague recollections from her nightmares. And if Holly remembered correctly, the poor witch was long dead. They would be lucky to even find her body.

As usual, the Ministry was doing far too little far too late.

Nervous didn’t even begin to describe Holly in those last moments as she marched across the Hogwarts grounds to her doom. Sure, she’d practiced the Summoning spell nonstop for the last three days and had even skipped a Hogsmeade weekend, but that didn’t mean she was completely confident. There were a thousand different ways this could go wrong, and many of them ended with her as a messy red streak across the grass. It didn’t help that she’d have an audience either. Nor that her godfather and Eren Zabini would undoubtedly be among the spectators, most likely only held back by Dante. Blaise, of course, would be with them. Not that he’d be much use in calming anyone. Truth be told, he would probably only keep his seat if the others put him in a full-on body-bind.

It was a grim thought as she trailed behind McGonagall and by the padlock where she knew the dragons awaited, entering the newly-erected tent off to the left and coming to a stop just inside. The other champions glanced up at her arrival, all of them seeming to be in similar shape as her. Of course, Holly could imagine how they felt. Everybody knew about their first task. Krum and Fleur because of their headmaster and mistress respectively. Cedric because Holly had told him herself.

Still, none of them truly looked confident. Fleur was exceeding pale, sweat dotting her forehead and her hair swishing more than normal as she jiggled her leg on top of her stool. Cedric paced back and forth across the centre of the tent, hands clasped behind his back, though he did smile when he saw Holly. Krum just stood in the near corner, away from the others, shoulders hunched. He inclined his head as she drifted his direction, standing between him and the door but still out of the way.

No one but Bagman, who was also present, spoke in the next few minutes. And reinforcing her shields was all Holly could do as she stood stock-still, dread only growing at the sounds of people filling the nearby stands. She could sense Blaise and her friends out there, along with several other very familiar presences, but they brought little comfort.

And soon enough, it was time. Bagman produced a drawstring bag and held it out to them.

“Ladies first,” he commented cheerfully.

Holly and Fleur exchanged a look before the part-Veela was reaching in the bag to draw out a miniature Welsh Green with a number two around its neck. The Slytherin’s own model was much fiercer looking, four a very prominent figure as she studied it. Her heart sank as she realised it was the Hungarian Horntail, the dragon that made even Hagrid wary. Cedric seemed both sympathetic and nauseous as he pulled out the Swedish Short-Snout and the number one. Which left a wincing Krum with the Chinese Fireball and the third timeslot.

She barely even listened to Bagman as he gave them their final instructions and dismissed him entirely when he tried to pull her to the side. Holly honestly didn't care what he had to say, too busy going over her game plan. Which was probably why she nearly jumped out of her skin when a whistle blew.

Cedric, looking incredibly green, turned for the exit. Holly gave him a vague wave good luck – or perhaps goodbye. He returned it shakily, and then, he was gone.

Hearing his attempt in the background, the crowd screaming and cheering and groaning along with him, was mind-numbingly horrendous. Bagman's commentary only made it just that much worse. Her belly twisted into knots as she listened, and not even her strongest shields were enough to keep her completely focused or to ease the bead of tension rolling down her spine. She didn't dare stretch out her senses to see what was going on, didn't even want to know.

It seemed that both Fleur and Krum were of a similar mind. The older witch took up pacing where Cedric had left off, while Krum inched closer to Holly. He hovered nearby almost like he wanted to speak or possibly seek some kind of reassurance. Maybe to even give it to her if she looked even half as bad as she felt.

Over fifteen minutes later, another whistle blew. The signal, Holly supposed, that Cedric had finally gotten by the dragon and was now receiving his score. Bagman didn't call anything out, meaning that there had to be some sort of scoreboard or sign held up for the spectators. And very effectively preventing the other champions for knowing what he'd gotten.

Things were just getting better and better, weren't they?

Another whistle blew then, and Fleur froze for an instant, one foot poised midair. Her shoulders set after a few heartbeats, and she marched to the tent flap. But Holly saw her hands shaking as she clutched her wand, feeling more warmly towards the older witch in that moment than she ever had before. That only grew as Fleur hesitated at the exit and sucked in a deep breath.

Then, she and Krum were left alone. Standing next to each other in the exceedingly heavy air of the tent as time went by at an agonisingly sluggish pace. Listening to the roar around them until there was a stretch of silence for a long minute before the crowd let out a sudden squeal. Of surprise, disgust, or joy, Holly couldn't tell. She just felt her head swim at the unexpected swell of emotion, the force of several hundred people crashing down on her brain. And Holly must have swayed on her feet because Krum's fingers darted out to grip her elbow.

"It will be all right," Krum murmured softly, holding on as she found her balance.

"I... Yes. Thank you," Holly responded as she added strength to her shields, using his touch and the soft pulse of the magic under his skin as a focus. She felt his gaze on her for several seconds before he slowly released her arm.

But he remained silent as the noise of the audience washed over them again. Fleur apparently wasn't finished yet. In fact, it took another five minutes before she reached the egg. That was followed by a pause and then the signalling whistle.

It was Krum's turn now.

He simply squared his shoulders and went to step around her. "Good luck," Krum said as he passed by.

"And to you," she replied on automatic.

However, he paused just by the tent flap, and their eyes met as he tilted his head to duck. She felt something in her stomach jump as he gave a sharp nod, lips quirking up in an almost-smile before slipping through. Holly gazed after him, not entirely certain what had just happened. Simply left alone in the tent.

She did her utmost to block out the noise this time. It wouldn't do to faint before she could even start her task. She simply focused on her

shields, building up the layers and almost missing the signal that Krum was done. Holly only had a couple of minutes to come back to herself before the whistle blew for her, and the girl was out of the tent before she could think twice, walking by the tree line and towards the paddock. The stands were just to the right as she passed, and her eyes unerringly found Blaise, his face white and eyes incredibly huge as he stared back at her. Next to him, Milli was all but sitting in his lap, hand firmly wrapped around his arm. Draco was in a similar position on his other side, and the rest of their friends were closely packed in around them. Luna was on the inside of the group, tucked in between Pansy and Theo, with Tom's diary discreetly held open against her chest. The pages were turned outwards, allowing him to watch the spectacle with the rest of them.

Holly's gaze drifted, taking in the rest of the Slytherins, Titania shooting her a quick thumbs-up when she noticed her attention. Then, it went to the Gryffindor Quidditch team: the Weasley twins, the three Chaser girls, and Devon Lee their Seeker. Neville was in the row just below them, sitting next to Gavin's brother and Parvati Patil. Her attention darted away from the student's section to land on the crowd as a whole, zeroing in on Sirius involuntarily. Her godfather was as wide-eyed as Blaise. So was Eren next to him, both of her hands grasping her husband with white knuckles, head poised to hide in his shoulder if need-be.

All of this took place in the space of several heartbeats, but it seemed like an eternity as she walked out. The Horntail was at the very end of the enclosure, crouched low to the ground and hiding her eggs from sight. Her yellow eyes were gleaming as Holly approached, and she gave out a little hiss that sounded almost snakelike but did nothing to trigger the girl's latent Parsel abilities. But perhaps it was that familiar sound that did it, that made her nervousness and the knots in her belly melt away. Until all that was left were the buzz of her own magic and the same sense of complete calm she felt during her adventures. When her life was on the line but she had a purpose and clear goal in mind.

Holly strode boldly out in front of the audience, grip on her wand firm and steady. Her gaze took in the debris strewn around, half-melted rocks with obvious claw marks, brain working overtime as she

decided the best approach in a handful of seconds. She could feel her lips curling upwards as she flicked her wand, and the large rock by her foot turned into a hawk. It rose up into the air and headed for the dragon's head just as she directed, soon joined by a couple of ravens, three owls, and few geese and swans for good measure. She even transfigured a white duck just because she could.

All of them flew just above the Horntail and out of her reach. Winging this way and that in a combination of their own will and how Holly manoeuvred them. The dragon in turn snarled, swishing her tail back and forth like an angry cat about to pounce. She snapped out at the hawk before whirling to face a raven. Her tail swung towards the owls, and one taloned foot even swiped at a pair of geese. But she did not rise from her crouch.

Holly stepped up her efforts. She brought the birds closer, weaving and dancing around the Horntail. Coming close enough to brush her scales with their wings. That only served to make the dragon shudder with fury and let out a breath of flame. It was followed by another set of swipes and a whip of her tail. Even more fire came after that, trailing after the hawk as it dove to ground level to escape, cutting in Holly's direction. The edge of fire veered the same way, and the Slytherin responded without thinking. Holly jerked her wand and muttered the incantation for the strongest physical shield she knew, a spell she'd learned courtesy of Sirius just this summer. A dome of pure energy formed from the dirt and curved to just above her head a scant few seconds before the flames impacted. All she felt was a trickle of heat as the blaze was diverted around her, but she heard the scream of the audience in the distance. It lingered until the fire dissipated, only to be followed by a universal sigh of relief.

Then, Holly was ignoring them again. Her avian helpers just had to be faster, fiercer. She directed them even closer, made them even more daring. Actually losing two of her swans and a goose for her efforts to fire and the tail respectively. But it seemed to be working. The dragon was slowly, centimetre by centimetre, lifting higher to chase after them. The tipping point came as her lone duck suddenly swerved to avoid a fiery death and nearly collided with the Horntail's right eye. With that, the dragon finally seemed to have had enough. She rose up on her back-legs in hot pursuit, neck straining as she stretch out

and upwards. Entire body lifting from the ground and allowing her eggs to be visible.

And there it was. Gleaming in the sunlight like a giant ovoid nugget.

Holly could barely contain her exhilaration as she held out her wand. "Accio golden egg."

Her voice was calm, almost scarily so, and her aim was true. A golden streak shot right out from under the dragon's belly and directly towards her. Better yet, the dragon was too busy snapping at the veritable flock darting through the air around her to even notice. The egg met no resistance as it flew right into Holly's outstretched hands. She wasted no time in dashing away either, unwilling to further test her luck and the Horntail's skills of observation. Not even stopping until she came to the far edge, despite the fact that the dragon handlers were already on the move.

And only when she got there did the rush of the crowd finally catch up. It was deafening. So was Bagman.

"Look at that," he practically screamed. "Will you look at that! Our youngest champion is the quickest to get her egg! And not even a scratch on her! Well, this is certainly going to shorten the odds on Miss Potter!"

Holly couldn't help but smirk, but let out a little laugh as several professors rushed her way. Hagrid, McGonagall, Moody, and Snape. The first two were quick to offer their congratulations, while her Defence professor just gave her a twisted grin. Her Head of House looked at her with pride and gifted her with a resolute nod, black eyes glittering. His hand found her shoulder and squeezed as he guided her to the first aid tent, not that she needed it. He lingered as Pomfrey gave her the once over, muttering under her breath the entire time. Holly just had enough time to glimpse Cedric with half his head covered in orange paste before she was outside again.

Blaise was waiting for her, breathing hard like he'd just run a marathon or had been wrestling the crowd. Possibly both. The others weren't with him, but then, they'd probably not been able to keep up.

Sirius and the Zabini parents were seated farther away, but they were undoubtedly on their way.

Her best friend just reached for her as she blinked at him in surprise, grasping her hand and refusing to let go as they walked back to get her scores. Much to Professor Snape's smug amusement. The Potions master just hovered behind them both, still gripping her shoulder as she came before the judges. His hand tightened at the first ten, courtesy of Bagman. It was followed by another ten from Madam Maxime and a nine from Dumbledore and Crouch each. His grip was nearly bruising at the five Karkaroff held up, and Holly could all but feel the scorching scowl he sent over her head.

They took her back to the champions' tent after that. Blaise was poised to follow her in, but the professor held him back with a look. Holly just winked, heart beating excitedly as she slipped inside. She was only alone for a moment before the three other champions came in with Bagman. Cedric was still covered in that same vibrant paste, all but beaming at her, and Fleur's robes were scorched thoroughly along one side. Krum, however, seemed perfectly intact. His dark eyes were gleaming as he came to stand next to her.

"You did very vell," he said in an aside, seemingly pleased. "I vas vatching. I did not even think to do that."

Holly couldn't help but smile at the hint of admiration in his voice. "I almost didn't either," she admitted. "I was going to summon my Firebolt."

"Oh?" Krum questioned with actual interest, turning to face her. "You have one? Do you play Quidditch then?"

"It was a gift from my godfather." She glanced up at him underneath her eyelashes. "And yes, I do."

"What position do--" Krum started to ask, but he abruptly faltered as Bagman approached and gathered them around.

His instructions for the next task were summarily unhelpful. Only telling them that the egg would need to be opened in the near future. He sent them on their merry way after that, winking and beaming like he'd had a few too many shots of Firewhiskey. He even clapped Holly on the arm in what she supposed was meant to be a friendly manner. However, it only made her very uneasy, backing away from him and dodging her way through the exit before anything more could be said.

Professor Snape was gone, but her friends were there, quickly pulling her off for a round of hugs and back pats. Blaise again latched onto her when they were done, but his monopoly on her ended as they reached to the other side of the tree line and Sirius and Eren came running, Dante trailing behind. Holly only had a moment to wonder where the three younger Zabini children were before they were on her. Her godfather was just a step away, going in for a hug, but in a move that was oddly familiar Eren shoved him out of the way and swept up Holly instead.

"Dammit, woman!" Sirius muttered heatedly as he nearly ploughed into Luna. "Every time!"

Dante just smothered his laughter as his wife held on for minute longer. Sirius was still glaring when Eren pulled back and he snatched Holly from her grasp for his own embrace. He even slung his arm around her shoulders afterwards, effectively wedging her between Blaise and him.

They filled her in on the other champions as they walked back to the castle, evading Rita Skeeter along the way. None of them had thought to summon the egg. Cedric had done a transfiguration tactic similar to her own. But he'd only done a single dog and had made a run for the egg himself, which is how his face had caught the dragon's fire. Fleur had attempted to use her Veela magic to charm her Welsh Green, and while she'd gotten the egg, she'd also managed to burn her robes along the way. Krum though had gone on the offensive, using a spell to the dragon's eye and every ounce of his Seeker skills to successfully dodge her counterattacks. He'd even managed to cast a shield to protect the other eggs from her thrashing, earning extra points in the process. According to Eren, that was how he and Holly managed to tie.

“Not that she saw anything,” Dante whispered to Holly as they came to the front doors. “She was too afraid to watch.”

The party that night was enormous. Holly couldn't recall her Housemates ever being this loud or boisterous. Not even when they'd won the Quidditch cup. The common room wasn't even large enough to hold everyone as they were joined by a number of Ravenclaws and even a few Gryffindors, the Weasley twins the most notable among them. Spilling out into the study rooms and even a couple of the bedrooms.

Naturally, everyone wanted to talk about the first task, but more than that, they wanted to see the golden egg. Holly let them inspect it as they wished but refused to open it. That, she did the next evening with her friends.

It was empty and hollow inside. However, the instant it opened, a horrid screeching wail echoed across the room. Loud and ear-splitting. Like nails across the chalkboard but a hundred times more deafening. Even worse than Pansy when she was singing in the shower or Draco when he'd tried to play Cynthia's flute.

Holly snapped it shut firmly, a strand of hair fluttering free from her ponytail from the force. She just let out a shaky breath, taking in the others' reactions. Milli and Theo were rubbing their ears furiously, while Gavin was clutching his temples. Draco shook his head like he was trying to regain feeling there. Everybody else was in similar straits. Even Luna looked a little squinty-eyed.

“Maker,” Blaise said after a minute, “what was that?”

“A banshee maybe,” Daphne responded. “Do you have to fight them next?”

“It sounded like a dying Dementor,” Draco commented with a shudder.

Theo suggested with a green tint to his face, “Someone screaming.”

“More like being tortured,” Milli retorted. Her lip curled downwards. “What are they going to have you do? Survive the Cruciatus curse?”

“That would be illegal,” Gavin cut in from next to her, tilting his head back.

“Not that the audience or judges would care or anything,” Draco muttered. “It’s all pure entertainment gold. Nothing like death and dismemberment to get that excitement flowing.” He waved his hands out.

Holly snorted. “You won’t hear an argument from me.”

“True,” Blaise stated, looking around. “But seriously, what was that?”

“It was Mermish,” Vincent said absentmindedly. “Maybe you have go see them in the lake or something.”

Everyone gaped at him. The silence was so obvious that they could’ve heard a pin drop.

“What?” Vincent asked with a defensive air. “I can have a good idea occasionally.”

“Oh, big word,” Milli teased on automatic. “What happened? Get a dictionary for your birthday?” However, she quieted after that as her face took on a suspicious cast.

“How did you even know that?” Gavin asked with an equally puzzled look.

“My mom speaks it,” Vincent informed them. “She comes out to the lake and does business with the merpeople every now and then. Above water, they sound just like that.”

Pansy pursed her mouth. “Above water you said?”

“So if we hold the egg underwater, it may sound different then,” Luna concluded.

“Maybe it’ll even sound like real voices,” Milli murmured, “and not like Pansy’s interpretation of the Weird Sisters.”

That sounded almost too good to be true, but it wasn’t. The screechy noise morphed into actual voices when mulled beneath Holly’s bathwater that night, but the message revealed wasn’t all that comforting. She inferred that she’d have to go into the lake, but what exactly was she supposed to be looking for? What were they going to take? It couldn’t be anything too valuable, could it? But what possession could she care about enough to go through that much effort?

Certainly nothing she owned. Maybe her wand, but then, it was her first link to the magical world. The pictures she had of her parents were valuable and irreplaceable. So was her Invisibility Cloak and the locket she still wore around her neck. What else was there?

It was a conundrum Holly mulled over the next few weeks as November faded into December. The grounds were covered in snow virtually every day, which only made Hagrid’s class that much more an exercise in aggravation above and beyond the rapidly growing skrewts. It didn’t help that Rita Skeeter was caught lurking around on more than one occasion or that she had released an article about the danger of Hogwarts’ current curriculum. Trelawney’s classroom was at least warm, although still annoying because she kept predicting Holly’s death on a regular basis.

Arithmancy more than made up for that though. Rosetta had actually set them on a year-long project for breaking down one of the spells in their repertoire and making personalised modifications. Holly had initially thought to do a Stunner but had decided instead to go above and beyond, altering the same shield she had performed during the first task and the spell she used to get her little friend Saladin. The extra credit couldn’t hurt, and both could prove useful in the future. Besides, it was fun.

Runes was on a similar level. They were still focusing on Norse runes, expanding out into Celtic, but Tom swore that many of these were excellent for focusing or adjusting magical power and would make good additions to any wand. In fact, he'd even added some to the one he currently had in his possession, and several in their group had expressed interest in the matter.

The rest of her classes were the same as usual. Professor Snape seemed to take her success of the first task as personal vindication, not to mention for their House as a whole. Flitwick congratulated her but didn't go over the top, and Sprout was actually acknowledging that she lived. McGonagall was a bit friendlier than she had been in earlier years, not that she was outright amiable or anything. She was still strict but easier to please. Perhaps she had finally forgiven Holly for being a Slytherin and not Gryffindor like her parents and Sirius.

The other Houses also seemed to have forgiven her from being a champion. Holly suspected that much of it was Cedric's work, especially with the Hufflepuffs. The Badgers still weren't happy with her, but they didn't go out of their way to be mean about it either. No snide comments either, though a few of the badges still remained on Cedric's most strident supporters and those who just didn't like Holly flat out.

She was fairly on good terms with the pupils from the other schools. Beauxbatons' students were polite, but they were far more interested in her friends. Cynthia and one of the boys got on especially well, enough so that they'd been caught snogging by Sinastra. Despite the detention, Cynthia claimed that it was worth it.

Durmstrang continued to sit at their House table with Krum usually across from Holly at meals. He occasionally spoke to her but mostly hung back and listened. He wasn't exactly the most talkative person, and his reputation as a Quidditch hero notwithstanding, Holly actually saw him more in the library than at meals. The older boy practically haunted the stacks; he was there as soon as the doors opened and didn't leave until closing. Often with a bag full of books. Holly honestly wondered when he slept. Unless he had a Time Turner like Draco claimed. She wouldn't put it passed him.

Holly's heaps of fan mail persisted after the first task, taking a definite turn for the better. By far and large, the majority of the letters were friendly or congratulatory. Although she still received some downright creepy letters and more than a handful of marriage proposals. Those were immediately forwarded to Sirius and Eren. Holly didn't even want to know how they responded. She guessed it wasn't anything good.

During this time, Holly wasn't the only one with tribulations though, and she honestly felt horrible for Neville and Ron, the former who had even taken refuge with the Slytherins several times. According to the Weasley twins, Hermione had started an organisation dedicated to freeing house-elves from slavery, and while this sounded fine on paper, it had numerous hang-ups in practice. Not the least of which was the fact that house-elves derived quite a bit of their magic from their owners. Some were even known to die when the bonds they held were broken and they were set free. Known to not only go into shock from the sudden loss of magic but to actually mourn themselves to death. Hermione's manner of recruitment also left something to be desired, shoving her money tin under the noses of random people and shoving leaflets into their hands. Holly did want treatment of house-elves to be improved as a whole, but there had to be a better way than a simple student group, particularly one that only served to alienate potential members.

Her friends, of course, had their own difficulties as well. Draco still claimed that Moody was stalking him throughout the castle. He now refused to wander around by himself and had taken to sticking with Holly and Blaise even more than usual lest the Defence professor get the jump on him. On a similar note, Gavin was worrying more and more about his brother. The younger Darklighter was apparently having problems making friends in his new House and barely talked with his roommate at all. The Weasley twins and Neville looked out for him, but that wasn't the same as having someone around his own age. Pansy, in the meantime, had her own family issues. Her great-grandmother was very ill, so much so that she wasn't expected to live much beyond the new year. Pansy was understandably upset, but there simply wasn't anything they could do to help her. This was a problem beyond them.

Nonetheless, even with all this, Holly still had other matters on mind. Most especially in relation to her status as champion. And unfortunately for her, there was an unofficial task in every Triwizard Tournament, one that was open to all students. A dance. In this case, a ball that was scheduled for Yule Night.

This presented a distinct problem. Holly was going home for the holidays. No ifs, ands, or buts. She was going to spend Sirius' first Yule as a free man at their house, and nothing short of Merlin's third coming was going to stop her. But champions were required to attend, which meant she'd at the very least have to come back for a day, even if she went home for the rest. Thankfully though, Professor Snape had informed her that option was perfectly acceptable, and Sirius had readily agreed, eager to see her again for an extended period of time. Blaise was even going home, too.

That didn't correct her final dilemma, however. Holly now needed a date.

AN: I went to see the new movie. It wasn't great but was okay. But then, I wasn't a big fan of book six anyway.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Forty-Seven: Dancing with the Stars

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Forty-Seven: Dancing with the Stars

Holly had never before realised just how many students were in Hogwarts. Intellectually, she knew that the number was in the hundreds, but it had not ever occurred to her just what that implied until she walked down the hallways with eyes on her every move. With them watching her at mealtimes. Taking note of whomever she spoke to or greeted. Every flick of her hair and the way she swished her robes when she walked. She'd never before recognised just how many people watched her with more than a casual sort of interest. Most of the boys and no small amount of girls.

But then, she was Holly Potter, currently the leading champion and famous for defeating the most dangerous Dark Lord in recent memory. It didn't hurt that she was powerful and rich and didn't resemble a hag. Even if they had no real interest in her—magically, emotionally, or Maker forbid... sexually—most people would gnaw off their right arms to be her date. To even be seen with her. They would bend their preferences and distance themselves from their normal partners for even the chance.

It was all a bit overwhelming. Causing her eyebrows to lift to heights never before seen as person after person approached her with the hope of the Yule Ball dancing in their heads. The number of Slytherins among them was thankfully small but still present in an amount that made her uneasy. And she honestly should've been surprised by the number of girls, nearing double digits by the time she finally stopped counting. But Holly wasn't. The magical world at large had no taboo on the matter either way, most especially since much of it either had a root in the classical Mediterranean cultures or had never adopted the majority Muggle religions. Still, though she was very open-minded, Holly knew enough about herself to understand that she preferred boys—thank you very much—and sent her female admirers off with a sheepish smile and shake of her head.

The boys were slightly harder to discourage. Holly dismissed the ones she didn't know personally out of hand, figuring that if they hadn't tried to get to know her by this point that they weren't worth it. But that left quite a few who did in fact speak to her on a semi-

frequent if not regular basis. People like Devon Lee the Gryffindor Seeker, who gave a sad little shrug when she had turned him down. And Mordecai Montague and Constantine Warrington from her own House's team, both of whom were good sports when she declined their offers. Unfortunately, they weren't the only ones, but Holly refused time and time again.

No one in her immediate circle had asked her yet – thank the Maker and every other minor deity and being of power in existence. Holly didn't even want to contemplate what she might have said to them in reply. Merely grateful that it hadn't occurred by this point, and as things were shaping up, perhaps they simply wouldn't. Luna wasn't old enough to go on her own, but Gavin was going with some third-year from Gryffindor, Athena Avis if she remembered correctly. Milli had asked Theo over lunch one day, and he'd apparently accepted. Daphne's date was Dimitri Dolohov, and Draco was still plucking up the courage to ask Blaise's cousin Alé. Cynthia wasn't going at all, instead choosing to spend her break in Australia with her uncle and his new wife. Autumn was supposed to be going with Vince, who she had fancied for some time strangely enough. Pansy had come across her date completely by accident, agreeing to go with Neville to save him from an overeager Ginny Weasley. That only left Greg, who had expressed zero interest in the event, and Blaise.

Her best friend, of course, had his own set of problems. Apparently, the idea of a platonic but deep friendship escaped people, and a good deal of them assumed that since he spent so much time with Holly that he either was her boyfriend or wanted to be. Which meant that they delighted in the idea of stealing him away from her and subsequently bombarded him with offers. In all honesty, he'd had nearly as many as Holly herself. Everyone from Ravenclaws to Beauxbatons' older witches. Even Sophia Dolohov was among that number, but he'd yet to give her a reply as far as she knew. Maybe that meant he was actually considering it.

Nonetheless, this didn't help Holly in the slightest. She was a champion. She had to go the ball, and she would look very silly performing the opening dance without a partner. A date was a definite requirement. She just had to pick one, but easier said than done. She didn't want anyone getting the wrong impression. This was for the

Yule Ball alone; she wasn't interested in dating at the moment or even in the near future. Holly had to first finish this damn tournament with her sanity and life intact. Everything else came as second or didn't even rate on her scale. And under normal circumstances, the ball would be much the same. Picking a date was a rather small thing in comparison to the regular hassles of her time at Hogwarts. All Holly had to do was say yes when a boy asked. Or go up to somebody and bring it up on her own. She just needed to figure out which one.

The decision simmered on her mind for days, flowing through her thoughts at odd intervals. During class. At meals. When she sat down in her preferred corner of the library. And she was there by herself, excused from both the review sessions for her exams and the finals themselves, when an opportunity presented itself.

Holly sensed him before she saw him, lifting her head to see Viktor Krum turn the corner around a bookshelf and stride up to her table. He paused by the empty seat beside her and cleared his throat.

"May I please sit here?" he asked softly, voice a gentle tenor that held an odd note of nervousness.

She just studied him for a second before nodding. "Sure. I don't mind."

Krum gave a little smile, barely more than a quirking of his lips, and placed his bag on the tabletop. He settled into the chair easily enough, but Holly quickly noticed that he didn't pull out any books or even a parchment and quills. Instead, his eyes just flicked around the area – like he was making sure nobody else was around, which they weren't this time of morning – and wiped a hand on his pants. His fingers drummed on his seat for a moment, and Holly had the distinct impression that he was trying to gather the nerve to speak. It was taking his merry sweet time about it, however. Moments stretching on as he shifted in his chair for the third time in as many minutes.

It all served to make Holly distinctly uncomfortable. Hyperaware of the older boy just centimetres away from her. The fact that he was close enough to touch but didn't. And that he smelled vaguely of paper and spiced apple cider. Not at all unpleasant or altogether

strange given his apparent love of the library and the time of year but still odd enough to make her take pause and inhale deeply. But still, his edginess flowed straight to her brain and made her own heart beat faster, raising her shields to block him out.

Finally, after several long moments of this, Holly had had enough.

“Is there something I can help you with?” she questioned in a tone that was steady but soft, barely above a whisper.

He still heard her. “I... Yes, actually. I believe that you can.” His gaze was fixed on her face for a second before darting around again.

But they were still very much alone in this corner of the library. The closest person Holly sensed was Madam Pince herself nearby the main entrance. The area was completely empty. Everyone was either in class or still asleep. After all, it was just a little after eight in the morning. No sane person would be here this early. Not even close to exam time.

“Yes,” the Slytherin prompted when he said nothing further, too busy studying the tabletop like it held all the answers of the universe.

Krum cleared his throat again and swallowed. “I vas vondering if... if... your boyfriend vas around,” he said in a rush. Only to have his face instantly harden like he hadn’t intended to say that at all.

Holly gave him a sceptical look until his words caught up with her. She blinked. And whipped her head around so quickly that she now had a crick in her neck.

“My boyfriend?” And she didn’t ever recall using that particular tone before. High and very surprised.

“That boy you are always vith,” he explained. “I see him vith you everywhere. He always sits next to you at dinner as well.”

It didn’t take a genius to figure out who he meant.

“Blaise.” It was a statement more than a question. “He’s my friend. Only my friend,” the Slytherin replied but shook her head at the simplicity of that answer. “Well, he’s more than just a friend, but he’s not my boyfriend. He’s my best friend,” she clarified, hoping that made sense.

Krum shrugged. “I think that I understand. He is dear to you, yes? But you do not date.” He cocked his head to the side and lifted a brow.

“Yes! Exactly.” Holly grinned. “That’s it exactly.” But then, something occurred to her as she replayed their conversation in her mind. “Wait? You were looking for Blaise,” she asked after a few heartbeats, honestly confused.

“Yes... vell, no. I vasn’t.” Krum shifted uneasily. “I just... I did not vish to say this in front of him.”

She just gazed at him, knowing that her utter confusion had to be showing on her face. Holly honestly had no idea what Krum could want to say, what could possibly make him act this way. The boy was nervous. Practically stuttering. Sweaty palms. Looking at her and then instantly away. Leg jittering against the table. Acting just like all the people who had--

Her thoughts came to an abrupt and fiery halt. And a hot flicker of suspicion shot down her spine and twisted around her front to settle in her belly. Which instantly fluttered like ten thousand butterflies had suddenly taken up residence.

Maker and Merlin together, was Krum trying to ask her to the Yule Ball? He couldn’t possibly be doing that, could he? He was famous and a Quidditch star, didn’t he already have a date? Shouldn’t he already have a date?

But the answers to those questions quickly became apparent.

“I... Would you go to the Yule Ball? Vith me, I mean?” he asked all in a rush, nearly forgetting to pause between each word.

Holly just looked at him. Surprised. Shocked. Blushing heatedly as his request sank in.

“Er...”

She struggled for an answer. To even make her mind process correctly. Just looking at him with what she knew had to be a wide-eyed and befuddled expression.

“If you already haff a date, I understand,” Krum added then, sounding so damn sincere that she couldn’t help but wince inside.

“I don’t,” she replied without thought. “I... er... don’t have a date yet.”

Krum’s face took on a vaguely hopeful cast, black eyebrows lifting. Holly expected her heart to sink. Instead, it just fluttered. And well, she did need a date. And he had asked. So why not? It wouldn’t hurt anything.

“I... Okay,” she said finally.

“Okay?” he repeated. Like he couldn’t quite comprehend.

“The Yule Ball... I go with you,” Holly clarified, trying and failing to stamp down on the sudden fluttering in her stomach.

“You vill?” The edges of his mouth curled upwards, dark eyes glinting with something a lot like relief mixed with excitement. “I... Thank you. I am very pleased.” His cheeks glowed a faint pink then, gaze sliding away from her as he shifted in his seat.

And something dawned on her in that moment as she watched him. It suddenly occurred to Holly that for all his fame and Quidditch skills, Viktor Krum was shy. Exceedingly so. Unable to meet her eyes for more than a few seconds before his blush deepened. Fingers dancing energetically across the tabletop.

It was actually rather cute. And more than a little bit amusing. That someone who seemed so surly and unapproachable at times could

be like this. That the arms crossed over his chest and hunched shoulders were not because he didn't like people, more like because he didn't know how to handle them. That he all but stuttered through the rest of the planning – where they would meet and at what time. That he practically ran after they had it all sorted out, shooting her a quick grin and dashing for the door.

She could only stare bemusedly after him. Wondering at the strangeness of the situation. Her friends felt much the same when she told them just before lunch.

“You're in love with him” the very first thing that Draco thought to accuse, nearly missing a step as they went down the corridor.

Holly just gave him a look. “I don't even know the guy,” she defended.

“But he's ridiculously good at Quidditch!” the blond retorted like that was the most obvious answer ever.

“And famous,” Pansy pointed out from his other side.

Milli inserted, “And wealthy.”

“So am I,” Holly replied with a shake of her hand.

They paused to consider that. Pansy and Milli glanced at each other and then at Theo, who hadn't commented yet. Draco pursed his lips, while Blaise made a face.

“Oh, I forgot.” Draco gave a half-shrug. “Still, going with Krum, that's a rather big thing. He is another champion. The papers will have a field day.”

Holly hadn't considered that and said as much.

“It's not that big of a deal,” Milli was quick to assure her. “It's just a dance. One date. If you don't enjoy yourself, then don't go out with him again. It is not like you're going to marry him or anything.” She said that with a sense of finality, not that it stopped the others.

“True,” Theo allowed. “Your kids would be funny looking with his eyebrows and your tendency to squint.”

“But the wickedest Quidditch players ever,” Draco added swiftly, seemingly hung up on that point.

“Well, thanks a lot,” Holly retorted. “Since skill in Quidditch is the epitome of my existence.”

“They’d be smart, too,” the blond attempted with a winning smile.

She narrowed her eyes. His grin faltered a bit.

“They wouldn’t look that bad,” Theo commented. As her gaze went to him, he continued, “They wouldn’t look bad at all. Very lovely children. Smart. Attractive.”

“And wonderful at Quidditch!” Draco insisted.

Holly gave him a mental shove. Which made him nearly take a nosedive into a suit of armour.

“I’m not marrying him,” the girl retorted and crossed her arms over her chest. “There will be no children. It’s just the one date.”

“Of course, it is,” Milli responded. She patted Holly on the shoulder.

“And more importantly,” Pansy cut in, “what are you going to wear? Did you already buy new robes? Or were you going with us to get fitted?”

“Neither actually,” Holly answered. “Eren is taking me. She thinks that my robes have to be just perfect since I’m a champion. I’m going to see and be seen. I have to both dress and act like a star.”

That was a direct quote. She even lifted her head when she said it, tilting her chin up just as Eren had.

Milli just shook her own head, but Pansy clapped her hands together in excitement. Her mind was clearly filled with visions of the ball and robes and makeup and other girly things. Theo very smartly stepped away from her. Draco did, too. Blaise, however, only moved closer to Holly. He hadn't spoken by this point and didn't even talk as he tugged her back a bit. He let the others pull ahead of them both, lowering his mouth and not still saying anything until they went by a trio of Hufflepuffs and a lone Ravenclaw.

"Do you like him?" he inquired softly. Obviously trying not to be overheard. "Krum, I mean. You haven't really said either way."

Holly nearly goggled at him. This was the first thing he'd said to her all day besides a quick good morning. Though to be fair, he'd had class, while she hadn't.

"Hello to you, too," she commented then. "Why yes, I did have a nice morning. And yourself?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh, it was splendid. Taking an Arithmancy pre-exam is the stuff of my dreams." He nudged her with an elbow. "I heard that you have a date to the Yule Ball. How wonderful for you."

"It is, isn't it?" she shot back, lowering her voice as a Gryffindor couple walked by hand in hand.

"So it's Krum, right?" her best friend went on. "I do wonder though if you really like him. Or was he just convenient."

The girl shrugged. "I don't really know him, but he did ask. So why not? I needed a date, and I'd pretty much turned everyone else down. I was running out of options."

Blaise ran a hand over his face. He remained silent as they passed by other students. A smattering of Hufflepuff first-years. Several Slytherins they recognised in passing. Four Ravenclaws who seemed to be arguing over their exams results with Professor McGonagall. And Sophia Dolohov, walking with a tall Gryffindor fifth-year and

giving him a cheerful smile as they went through the doors to the Great Hall. Their conversation seemed intimate, heads bowed together and robes brushing as they moved to the Gryffindor table. For all that she'd ask Blaise to the ball, Sophia didn't seem to care that he was nearby. Or that he wasn't even looking at her.

Holly was puzzled by that, but the thought flittered away as they turned to their own table and sat down across from the Durmstrang students. Krum was in his usual spot opposite her. His lips quirked when their eyes met, and Holly felt her cheeks heat up. And then again when Krum's friend, Radek – the same boy who always made mooneyes at Titania and received them in return – elbowed him and gave a full blown grin. He obviously knew what had gone on between them. Krum dodged it expertly and tried to appear as though he hadn't even noticed. Milli and Theo just exchanged grins, while Pansy gave a girly sigh and Draco rolled his eyes. Blaise frowned at their antics, strangely silent.

The rest of the meal passed in a blur. In fact, the rest of the afternoon went in much the same way. And it didn't occur to Holly until later that Blaise hadn't spoken for the rest of the day.

Holly had hoped that her plans for the Yule Ball would stay off the radar. Unfortunately though, it didn't stay secret for long. Even a little over a day later, the news was already making its way around the school, spreading like a wildfire that someone had neglected to report. Everybody was talking about it from prefects that Theo overheard in the hallway to the first-year friends of Autumn's brother. Her own Housemates didn't really comment on the matter, aside from Titania who gushed like the schoolgirl she was and firmly instructed Holly that they would have to strategise hair and cosmetics. Not even assurances that Eren was dealing with the matter could dampen her enthusiasm. Holly supposed this is what she got since both of them were the only girls currently on the Quidditch team.

The rumours and innuendos didn't diminish in the slightest the days and weeks leading up to break. In fact, they only seemed to grow. Encompassing everything from Krum's supposed plans to take her on a moonlit broomride afterwards to a famous designer making her dress to his parents coming in especially for the occasion. All the

boys seemed either heartbroken or to be plotting revenge, while most of the girls gave her looks – dirty and longing both. Holly was equal parts disheartened and disgusted, just waiting for it to appear in the papers. She had no doubt that it eventually would, after the fact hopefully.

Even the Weasley twins waylaid her on the way to the train for her ride back to London, ostensibly to question her about her date but really to give Holly her gift – a self-made kit that was perfect for causing mayhem. They presented it to her with much flourish, and she had a suspicious idea that they'd even created the box it came in. A flashing pink and yellow number that was supposed to scream when someone other than her started to open it.

“Heard you were going with Viktor Krum to the Yule Ball,” one of the twins – Fred, she believed – said amicably as she slipped the now shrunken box in pocket.

The Slytherin didn't even both denying it. “Yes. Who told you?”

“Overheard some girls talking about it in the loo,” George answered with a ready smile. “We were testing one of our inventions on them.”

“I'm guessing that it worked then. Especially since they didn't catch you in there.” Holly was vaguely intrigued.

“It did ever so beautifully,” Fred assured her. “But don't change the subject.”

“We're actually surprised that you're going with Krum and not one of your friends,” George went on.

“Malfoy or that Nott boy. Or even Blaise. Didn't they ask you?” his brother questioned, eyes hinting but brain silent on the matter.

“No, actually,” Holly replied slowly. “None of them did.” She tilted her head as she considered what they were getting at, considering a quick sneak peak but deciding that it wasn't worth it. Not to mention that it felt dishonourable to boot.

George waved it off. "Probably thought you turn them down, too. You've already broken half the hearts of Hogwarts."

"Hopefully, that doesn't include yours," she returned with a hand on her hip.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not, our slippery, slithery Slytherin friend." Fred wagged his finger in her face.

"But I do know that both our youngest brother and sister are among that number," his twin inserted. "Not to mention our mum."

"Your mother?" Holly queried with utter confusion. Not an unusual state when dealing with them.

"Oh, yeah. Completely shattered." George nodded.

"You see, Holly," Fred began, putting an arm around her shoulder and steering her towards the front doors. "Mum wants you to join our family. Thinks it a truly splendid idea. Right up there with self-inking quills. And Gilderoy Flophard's books."

"Not to mention a spit in the face of people like the Malfoys and Zabini's," George continued, adding an arm from her other side. "Having you, the Girl-Who-Lived--"

"--and Hogwarts champion--"

"--and hopefully the Triwizard winner--"

"--that, too--"

"--as a Weasley."

"See... her secret plan is for you to marry Percy since you two get on so well," Fred said in an undertone. "If you were older, she'd

probably pair you with Bill, especially since you're definitely better than his last few girlfriends."

"She originally wanted you and Ron together, but now, she thinks that he's too immature for you," George fake-whispered.

"Plus, she hopes that he'll bag Hermione, while Percy gets you," the other twin commented with an endearing smile.

"And don't forget. Neville has to marry Ginny. And Charlie has to get with that Tonks girl. You know, Fred, the one with the cool hair."

"Then, we'll be set." Fred gave her shoulder a squeeze.

Holly couldn't do anything but narrow her eyes. "What about you two?"

"Us?" Fred inquired in his most innocent and winning tone, but it didn't work on her at all.

"Mum long ago gave up hope that anyone with sense would want us," George was quick to tell her. "Now, she just prays that we'll stay out of prison."

Holly just shook her head and bid the twins farewell soon after that. She made it to the train and into a compartment with time to spare. Not that it was difficult to find a seat since hardly anyone was going home. Just a smattering of first and second-year students along with the third-years who hadn't been invited to the Yule Ball. Cynthia joined her in short order followed by Luna. Blaise and Draco came in just before the train pulled away from the station, but they were both returning for the dance. Blaise had wanted to spend the holiday with Holly, and Draco's mother had been very insistent that he come home this year. Holly suspected that the Lady Malfoy had some lingering worries over what had happened at the World Cup.

The ride went by in a pleasant haze, and Sirius was waiting with Remus on the platform in London. The latter received some odd looks from the other parents, but no one dared to approach and

comment with Sirius and Eren Zabini so close by. A good thing since it had probably taken a bit of convincing to get the werewolf to make a public appearance; he was still jumpy about the incident in Diagon during the summer, not that Holly could blame him.

Instead of immediately returning home, they went to Zabini Manor for dinner and a reunion of sorts. Dante and the girls were happy to see them all, and the baby seemed especially taken with Remus, much to his consternation, refusing to be moved away from him throughout the meal. The way he settled into the werewolf's arms was so familiar that it came as no surprise when Holly recalled that Sirius and he were often guests here. She knew that Eren had been keeping an eye on them, making certain that they really were fit to oversee her foster daughter's primary care. So it made sense that she had vetted them out on her own children to an extent or that they at least had contact with the three younger Zabini siblings.

Dinner went by rather quickly, and they lingered for a time before finally heading back to Sirius' house, where they traded stories about past holidays spent at Hogwarts. Her godfather went to bed before midnight since he had to be at Saint Mungo's in the morning, but Remus and she stayed up well beyond that until he finally ushered her off to her room sometime after two. She didn't rise as early as she usually did the next morning but still got up in enough time to have breakfast with Sirius before he left. Holly settled down to do her holiday homework after that, trying to get the rest of it out of the way as soon as humanly possible. She had a busy schedule this break between the ball and several other things they had planned, including a meet and greet with some of the Animagus' extended family.

Summer had mostly been a time for Sirius and Holly – and Remus since he also lived there – to settle in and become better acquainted. Not to mention for Eren Zabini and Children of Wizards Services to see that everything was working out. And now, that the trial period was over and his guardianship all but unquestionable, her godfather deemed it past time for her to get to know the rest of the family. Well, at least the parts of it he still claimed. Which wasn't much. Basically, Andromeda Tonks née Black, her husband and daughter, and grudgingly Narcissa Malfoy.

Andromeda – call me Andy, dear – and her husband Ted were not quite what Holly expected. They were both former Ravenclaws, pleasant but on the bookish side. Andy had an aristocratic air about her, rich dark hair and a face so close to Narcissa's that Holly nearly did a double-take. Her refined features were tempered by her dancing eyes and rakish wit, which appeared at odd times and often made everyone around burst into laughter. She was rather like Sirius in many ways but was calmer in the manner only a mother could be, a soft and soothing energy and not his boyish flair. Ted, on the other hand, was very easygoing and laid back. The type to not lose his cool or easy smile in the middle of a disaster. He was handsome, undeniably so with his heart-shaped face and almost bronzed skin, but didn't seem to care either way. And it was very easy to see why a pureblood heiress would give up everything to stay with him, her Muggleborn lover. The emotion between them practically crackled in the air. Fierce and all-encompassing but gentled by their years together.

All in all, they were a nice couple. A welcome addition to Holly's ever-expanding family. Different but good. Their daughter though was the real oddball.

Tonks was a cheery but clumsy sort and certainly unusual, even for the wizarding world. First and foremost, she refused to be called by her first name – Nymphadora – preferring only her last. Second, she was an Auror in training and a Hufflepuff by House, both extremely atypical for the Black family as a whole. She also happened to be a Metamorphmagus, a witch capable of changing her appearance at will with little or no effort on her part. It was a skill that she delighted in showing Holly, changing everything from her hair colour to her nose – her favourite was one that seemed suspiciously like Professor Snape's – to making herself appear like an old man reminiscent of Dumbledore. A very neat and useful ability, but it did have drawbacks. Tonks could only make herself look that way; it didn't change any of her internal parts, so she couldn't say heal herself at will or make herself male in anything but outward appearance. She couldn't turn into animals either, limited strictly to humans and their proportions.

Of the three of them, Tonks the youngest was the most frequent visitor. Apparating over virtually every day to do some training with

Sirius. Her field evaluations, the tests she needed to become a full-fledged Auror, were apparently coming up in March and April, and she wanted some extra experience. It was a win-win situation for both of them. Her primary instructor – good old Mad-Eye himself – was otherwise occupied, and Sirius felt that he needed a refresher with the way things seemed to be headed. Remus got into the act occasionally as well, but he spent most of his time doing other things. Such as getting the Black estate and trust into some semblance of working order and several additional matters that neither he nor her godfather readily discussed with Holly.

The time until Yule drew near in short order. Holly hesitated in calling it Christmas – a term that was frowned upon outside of Hogwarts by just about everyone save Muggleborns and the occasional half-blood – and one that Sirius and Remus didn't even care to use most of the time. Both of them were traditionalists and didn't practice the mutated form of the classic Celtic holiday like Hogwarts did or even the Zabinis to an extent. They had the customary tree and presents, both ideas that were later stolen and incorporated into the Muggle holiday, but they diverged from there. Like the Zabinis they had the traditional Yule log, which was never bought and either given as a gift or taken from their own land, but they had a few other customs that the Zabinis being more Mediterranean didn't. Such as magically wassailing the small orchard that Sirius had at the end of his property, which had the added benefit of keeping the bowtruckles away since they liked to snack on the apples.

During that time, Holly of course did other things. She went with Eren to get her dress robes, a tailor-made set that were in several graduated shades of green with gold stitching and embroidery along the edges. And the older witch even had Sirius bring some of his family's jewellery out of the vault for her to look through, selecting the pieces that she thought would suit Holly best. A ring and matching bracelet with a Celtic knot design that were made of gold and a silvery metal the Slytherin suspected was platinum, along with a necklace that looked to have a diamond and emerald pendant. Sirius claimed that all three were Goblin-made and had been created generations ago. It was quite a feat he even still had them because upon the original owner's death Goblin works traditionally reverted back to the hands of the crafter or his students. But apparently, these

had been commissioned for the Black family as a whole, a neat and effective sidestepping of that culture prerogative.

Regardless, the effect that they and her robes had was stunning. Making Holly appear less like a schoolgirl and more like some wealthy heiress or debutante. Remus' eyebrows nearly rose to his hairline when she tried everything on, and even Sirius gave her a wide-eyed stare before beaming like some proud papa. He even went so far as to find his camera and snap a few photos, the better to embarrass her in front of her children someday. Eren just clapped her hands together in delight and all but patted herself on the back for her good job. She was of the opinion that Holly would – and should – be the belle of the ball. Holly thought that she was going to be overdressed compared to everyone else, especially with the jewellery, even as minimalistic as it seemed to be. This was just a school dance, not a Ministry Ball or one of those fancy shindigs that the Malfoys occasional threw, which even Draco avoided like the plague and was mostly able to miss since he was still underage.

A few short days later, Yule morning dawned crisp and clear with only a light dusting of snow on the ground. They ate breakfast in their pyjamas – even Remus who normally hated to walk around like that – and opened gifts in much the same way. They were joined for the latter by Tom, who'd spent most of the holiday in the library when he wasn't off talking with Sirius.

Holly received so many presents that she didn't even know where to begin, acquiring all manner of books and clothes – mostly from Eren – and Quidditch supplies – Sirius and Draco – and countless other things. Some like the portable Foe-Glass and hand-held Sneakoscope were obvious in their application. Others were more questionable at best. Like the pocket-knife her godfather gave her, which resembled a Swiss Army Knife more than anything and came with the guarantee that it could cut any rope and undo any knot. She supposed that might be useful in the future. As would be the athame set she got from Dante, enchanted specifically to be used in runic work and modifications, something a bit beyond her level at the moment.

They'd already exchanged gifts with the Tonks family the day before, so for lunch, they went to see the Zabini's. Which had the two-fold purpose of more presents and for Eren to help Holly get ready for the ball later on. Blaise sat next to Holly the entire time, hovering even closer than he usually did and usurping Lexie's normal place at her side. He didn't really say much though, just watching her and giving an occasional mental squeeze through their bond.

A little after two, Eren ushered her upstairs to start getting ready. Forcing her to take her second bath of the day, this one considerably longer and more luxurious if a bit strange in the fact that Eren sat in the bathroom with her and talked the whole time. She didn't even let the girl towel dry, instead using her wand and immediately forcing Holly into her underthings and then into a chair in front of a vanity. The Zabini matriarch then proceeded to do some very strange things to Holly's hair, casting spells and adding potions this way and that. And by the time the woman was done, her hair was styled elegantly on top of her head with a few artful strands curling around her face and neck. Another charm ensured that it wouldn't be coming down any time soon before Eren added a few bejewelled hair clips for accents and then immediately began dabbing some kind of powder onto her face. She went at that for awhile, adding dark lines around the edge of each eyelid and some type of shimmery cream that caught the light every time the Slytherin moved her head. Another charm cast to prevent nothing short of a monsoon from washing it away, and Holly was being forced into her dress robes. This actually took the least amount of time out of all of it, though Eren did fiddle with the seams and how it lay for a few minutes before finally declaring her ready.

Holly could only sigh in utter relief and wonder if Blaise was having a similar experience to hers, though she doubted it. Dante didn't seem the type to force this on his son. And since Eren was otherwise occupied, Holly couldn't really imagine anyone else doing it either. Certainly not Sirius or Remus, Maker forbid. He also had the added benefit of not having to search for his date since she was meeting them here before Sirius and Dante Apparated the three of them to Hogsmeade station. There, they'd ride the carriages to the front gates with the other people who hadn't stayed and whatever other guests the headmaster had invited.

It seemed like the entire household was already downstairs when Holly finally made it there, trailing in Eren's wake. Dante and the two girls, Remus still holding the baby, and Sirius just grinning at her like Yule and Beltane and his birthday had all come at once. Blaise, whose back was to her and who had yet to see her all dressed up, did an actual double-take. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, only to have his head immediately snap around in a move that left him wincing. He didn't gape, but it was a near thing. Making her feel jittery and nervous as he looked her up and down without saying anything at all. Luna, his date and a rather last minute one at that, just gave her a winning smile and fluttered over in her pink and purple ensemble. The effect made her resemble a butterfly, particularly with the way her dress floated behind her, but it was actually strangely beautiful once one got used to it. She went surprisingly well with the midnight blue and silver that Eren had forced Blaise into.

They didn't have much time to do more than nod at each other after that as Eren took pictures and then promptly shoved her husband and Sirius forward and set them all on their way. Dante and Blaise went first followed by the Animagus, who was taking both Luna and Holly, and they all made it to Hogsmeade without incident. The two adults wished them well and watched them enter a carriage before heading out, and they could only sit and wait as the other ones filled up. Holly did, however, spot a few people she knew moving around outside. Most were just familiar faces from Hogwarts, but she did catch a glimpse of Percy Weasley in the crowd. She briefly pondered on why he was even there as she watched him move closer, only to shiver when she recalled what the twins had told her about their mother's plans. Thankfully, Draco appeared and clambered into their carriage before Percy could even think to join them. He looked both dashing and pale in his black robes, though the high collar did make him vaguely resemble a vicar. He gifted her with a grin and a nod of his head when he saw her, complimenting both she and Luna in turn. The carriages started soon after that, and the ride passed in a pleasant buzz of excitement. Even Blaise, who'd been mostly quiet all day, spoke up and enjoyed the conversation.

They made it to Hogwarts in what seemed like record time, gazing with amazement at the sight of the lit castle with the night sky as a backdrop and stepping quickly into the Entrance Hall to avoid the chill. Draco went off to find Alé as soon as they were through the front doors, while Holly glanced around for Krum and wondered if she should start calling him Viktor. However, it was rather hard to spot him in the multicoloured sea. Almost no one was in the shade normally associated with their school robes, and while the effect was lovely in a muted sort of way, it did make things tricky. Even further, it was far too crowded for her to search him out mentally, not to mention the fact that she didn't want to test her shields in such a manner.

Instead, she settled for searching manually. Holly drew no small amount of looks as she went through the packed masses, which surprisingly seemed to part before her like the clouds before the sun. But even with that nobody could really move too far away, as smashed in together as everyone was. Nevertheless, Holly found her way amazingly unimpeded as she drifted to one of the tapestries – supposedly featuring Salazar Slytherin's son – that was near a small alcove by the stairs. This was where she'd told Krum to find her. Not that he was there yet or anything. She was just in the process of searching around turning to the left and then the right and then stepping out a bit further into the crowd and standing on her tip-toes when someone bumped into her from behind. It wasn't anything more than a soft nudge of their side into her back and didn't even make her sway on her feet.

Still, Holly turned around to apologise. Only to find herself looking into the surprised eyes of Viktor Krum.

AN: I was channelling my own prom memories in this chapter, and like Holly, I have no idea what half that stuff is supposed to do.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Forty-Eight: Through a Glass Darkly

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Forty-Eight: Through a Glass Darkly

Holly wasn't entirely sure why, but even ten minutes later, she still felt a tingle shoot down her spine every time Viktor Krum's gaze drifted her way. And it happened to drift her way quite a bit as they waited with the other champions and their dates to enter the Great Hall. The butterflies had yet to leave her stomach from their abrupt appearance, fluttering even more when she recalled the way his eyebrows had gone nearly even with his hairline when he had first caught sight of her. Or the way he had told her that she looked especially lovely and beautiful tonight with his dark eyes gleaming in a clear show that he meant every word. This was just a casual event between acquaintances and fellow champions, but somehow, Holly had the distinct impression that she was in over her head.

That sensation was only doubled as she watched the other students go by, being observed in turn. She recognised some of the faces in the crowd. Titania and Radek, her Durmstrang date. Draco and Alé, closely followed by a Pansy resplendent in pale pink and a wide-eyed Neville. Ron Weasley all but gawked at her as he stumbled by with the Patil twins and some no-name Beauxbatons boy. Autumn and Vincent went by hand in hand, flushed but grinning, with Daphne and Dimitri Dolohov just behind them. Milli and Theo both winked, while Gavin gave a thumbs-up and even his Gryffindor date managed a smile and a wave. Which was more than Holly could say of Blaise, who only narrowed his eyes at Krum and all but stalked through the doors with a dazed Luna floating behind him. That didn't even begin to count the reactions of everyone else. The stares. The pointing. The no small amount of curious and sometimes heartbroken looks thrown her way, though she couldn't tell if this was because of her or Krum.

And curse it all if she really did need to start calling him Viktor. Even if it was only in her own mind.

Thankfully, however, none of the other champions or their dates really picked up on the glances sent her direction. Either that or perhaps they simply didn't care. Roger Davies was too busy praising every deity known to humankind as he practically drooled over Fleur, and Cedric and Cho Chang – a Ravenclaw fifth-year who Holly had

perhaps only spoken to once – seemed very chummy as they leaned together and whispered.

That just left Holly and her date. The two of them standing together but not really saying anything as the last of the students trickled into the Great Hall. Krum seemed content to just listen to the conversation going on around them, and there was even a small smile tugging at his lips as he watched a bamboozled Davies. But Holly could see his attention slide to her every few seconds. Could see his fingers fiddle with the edge of his black and silver sleeves.

But just as it was about to become awkward, McGonagall came in for the save and directed them to pair up and head inside the hall. From her vantage point, Holly could see that everyone was clearly waiting for them. Standing at near attention with hungry and expectant faces gazing at her through the open doors. Waiting. Watching.

That observation flittered away though as Krum – Viktor, dammit! – turned to her and offered his arm in true gentlemanly fashion. She accepted with a faint smile, feeling her cheeks heat up as she wrapped her hand around to settle on his. The skin beneath her fingertips was warm and smooth but calloused from his Quidditch gloves. He was trembling very faintly, undoubtedly nervous and uncomfortable under all the scrutiny as they led the group to the top table. Holly herself couldn't blame him, feeling her own shoulder blades twitch from the force of the eyes on her back.

The judges were already seated as they approached. Dumbledore at the very centre in the place fitting a wizard of his age and status in the magical world, not to mention the fact that Hogwarts was hosting this event. Karkaroff and Madam Maxime were on either side of him with a few chairs in between, an even spacing to allow the champions to intermingle if they so desired. Ludo Bagman was there as well, beaming at their approach, but Crouch was noticeable by his absence. In his place was Percy Weasley, who pointedly drew out the chair next to him and glanced at her, and it was all Holly could do not to fidget under his vaguely pompous but pleased gaze. But through a lucky set of coincidences, Krum didn't notice him. Instead, he directed her over to sit down right next to Dumbledore, choosing to slip into the chair beside Madam Maxime and not his own headmaster. It was

an unexpected move on his part, leaving Cedric to sit at Dumbledore's left with Cho in the spot next to Karkaroff. Neither of them seemed pleased by this arrangement. Especially the wily ex-Death Eater, who had Bagman on his other side. Davies and Fleur settled into the only other seats available, those between Percy and Madam Maxime.

Dumbledore beamed as Holly lowered herself into her chair, which Krum – Viktor – had even pulled out for her. And the Slytherin briefly wondered how they had known they'd need fewer seats than anticipated since two of the champions had obviously come together. They'd probably guessed due to all the gossip. Or maybe the headmaster really was omniscient.

But that notion was dismissed as Dumbledore leaned forward to speak to his plate, only to have pork chops and squash appear. A rather odd combination but Holly still caught the drift as Percy repeated the action across from her and received something unpronounceable and Scottish. Everyone else at the table was quick to follow suit, and Holly's veal was heavenly. Done exactly the way she liked, just the way they did at Sirius' house. Making her suspect that somewhere, somehow Dobby was responsible. Krum also seemed to be enjoying his meal, as evidence by the way his lips curled at the corners. Not to mention the fact that knee pressed into hers didn't even jitter.

Holly knew her face had to be flushing as she comprehended that they were indeed touching underneath the table, but she didn't move away. Not even when Dumbledore leaned over with knowing eyes and started a conversation. She could only listen halfheartedly as the old man began to ask Krum... Viktor about Durmstrang, all too aware of the leg that pressed even further against hers. But she did perk up after a few minutes when Karkaroff butted in, not that eager to have his star pupil describe their school in such exacting detail. Especially when he gave hints to the castle's location. Dumbledore just smiled through the younger headmaster's snootiness, catching Holly's eye as he mentioned that not even he knew all of Hogwarts' many secrets. She couldn't help but grin back at him, thinking about the Chamber of Secrets. Not to mention the many passageways that Slytherin had added throughout the school.

Cedric, who had been listening in, picked up on the first part of her thoughts easily. As evidenced by the way he grinned at her over his Shepherd's pie. Yes, Hogwarts did have many secrets. Maybe even more than Holly herself.

As the conversation continued around her, something about Beauxbatons that she really didn't care to hear, the Slytherin took the opportunity to glance through the hall. She had noticed earlier that the House tables had been replaced by at least a hundred round ones that seemed to seat about a dozen people each. But she hadn't understood that all of them operated much like the top table. Not served browsing-style like they normal were but with each guest ordering individually. Somewhere, Hermione was probably blowing a gasket over all the extra work the house-elves had to be doing, and Holly could only be thankful that they weren't seated anywhere near each other. Though, come to think of it, Holly couldn't recall seeing the other girl earlier. Perhaps she wasn't even there.

Her eyes drifted then. Noting the presence of her friends, most of whom seemed to be congregated at one of three adjacent tables with a number of her Housemates and what appeared to be the Weasley twins thrown in. They all looked to be having a good time, talking and laughing and generally seeming pleased. All of them save Blaise, who was gazing so intently at the top table and directly at her that he wouldn't have noticed a wild manticores attack. His dark eyes were narrowed, the only show of emotion on his otherwise blank face, not caring for the food in front of him that he seemed to eat on automatic. He didn't even smile when he noticed Holly's attention in return, and all she could do was blink at him and send out a tentative tendril through their bond before muting the connection to keep out the noise of everyone else around them.

Her focus snapped back to her own table as Dumbledore spoke to her again and drew back Holly's attention with a wink. Asking about her holiday so far, mentioning his own Yule spent with McGonagall and Professor Snape, and oh-so-subtly bringing Viktor into their discussion. It just seemed natural after that to turn and speak to Viktor herself, much like they would if they were sitting at the Slytherin table, surrounded by Housemates and friends. To ask about

his home and family, something she knew the barest bones about. Not much beyond the fact that he was an only child with a cousin his age who also attended Durmstrang. And it wasn't until sometime later that she realised Dumbledore had stopped making comments and was now in deep discussion with Cedric, Madame Maxime, and Percy.

Holly sensed a set-up but couldn't bring herself to care as dinner came to a close, and the plates in front of them vanished. Dumbledore stood shortly afterwards, prompting everyone to copy him, and sent the tables to line the walls with a gentle wave of his wand. That action was followed by a silent conjuring of a stage in the centre of the hall that came complete with instruments, and within seconds, the band for the evening – The Weird Sisters, who were in fact all male – trooped up amidst a great deal of applause.

The Slytherin knew exactly what was coming then and tried to strengthen her resolve, even as she tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, very glad for her lack of glasses for the night. It was thanks to a spell Tom had found and was at best a temporary and sparingly used method. If she really wanted to ditch her glasses on a more permanent basis, Holly would either have to get Muggle contacts or wait until she was fully grown. No Healer worth their wand would dare to try anything before then, not to mention the fact that it would cost her a pretty Galleon. Nonetheless, it was rather appreciated at the moment, though it also meant that she couldn't hide behind her glasses.

Viktor reached for her arm then, effectively bringing her mind to the here and now as he led her out to the dance floor. She knew what to do, had been taught by Eren and Blaise, but it was an entirely different thing to have so many people watching her. She couldn't help but feel a twinge in her belly as he took her hand in an easy and practiced manner that let her know that he'd at least done this before. Something confirmed when he leaned into whisper that his mother loved to dance and had taught him when he was just a little boy. Holly had to smile at that comment, and whatever nerves she felt fell away at the image of a very young Viktor Krum and his mother doing exactly this. Holly just let herself be guided by him, enjoying the song

and the warmth of his hand on her waist and the feel of his robes beneath her fingertips.

The floor became crowded soon after that as more couples joined in, and the song effortlessly flowed into the next with Holly becoming even more at ease. But she hit a snag when the music paused to let the Weird Sisters pick up different instruments, and Viktor was pulled away by Madam Maxime, who'd originally been partnered with Dumbledore. Holly had a moment to panic as she saw Percy Weasley just metres away and approaching fast, but Dumbledore effectively cut him off by sweeping in himself and leading her into a relatively slow-paced foxtrot that somehow still kept time with the beat. Draco stole her for the dance afterwards, all but snatching her hand from the grasp of tall brunet boy who looked faintly familiar and was possibly in Hufflepuff. He kept her for the following dance before turning her over to Theo who directed her into waltz. From just beyond his shoulder, she could see Viktor dancing with Milli. He seemed to actually be enjoying himself, but he went into a full-blown smile when their eyes met. And it came as no surprise when Viktor was quick to switch partners with Theo after the song ended, ending up with Holly once more. They managed two more dances before both felt the need to rest and drifted over to one of the tables claimed by Holly's friends. Titania was there with her date, who grinned wickedly at their approach and nudged Viktor in the side when he thought the girls weren't looking.

Holly barely even had time to sip her punch, brought to her by Neville when he and Pansy came by to join them, before Cedric dragged her away. He only managed half a song before a very disturbed Cho – who had just managed to escape Moody – made off with him. That left Holly to mercies of a rather determined Beauxbatons boy before Viktor swooped in for the save. They finished that dance and the next one, only to be interrupted when Vector and Professor Snape cut in between them. Each snagged a champion, positively smirking with dark glee at the dejected students around them who'd had much the same idea in mind. Holly's Head of House guided her into something that resembled the lovechild of a quickstep and samba as the tempo of the music increased. He gave her back to Viktor for the much slower song that followed, almost managing to exit the floor before McGonagall intercepted him. Holly couldn't help but laugh at the look

on his face, nodding her head in their direction when Viktor blinked at her in surprise. He chuckled as well, all too amused as they both watched Snape glancing around for an escape.

They were still amused when the song ended, and Luna stepped over to curtsy and ask Viktor for a dance. Both of his eyebrows rose with that, but he quickly agreed when he saw George Weasley bow before Holly and subsequently sweep her off. The redhead all but manhandled her through what appeared to be a tango, switching partners with his brother Fred half-way through the song. It was all the Slytherin could do to keep up with them, barely having time to think as they passed her on to Neville for the next dance. It was a slower one, and Holly could tell that either Pansy or his grandmother had to have been giving him lessons as he twirled her around with a grin. Flitwick was swift to steal her after that, beating out one of his seventh-year Ravenclaws and a pair of Gryffindors. It was certainly odd to dance with someone shorter than herself, but he pulled it off masterfully, even kissing her hand at the end.

She took another break then, begging off Cedric when he stopped by for another try, and managed to weave her way back to her table from earlier. Vince and Autumn were already there, and the Muggleborn all but shoved her cup into Holly's hand when she saw how parched her roommate looked. Holly didn't even protest, just glad to have something for her dry throat, even more so when Vincent went and fetched another for her. She drank the second one much slower, sipping at it as she watched an enthusiastic Madam Hooch with Viktor; he didn't look nearly as happy as the teacher did but still managed to go along graciously. Holly's eyes drifted to Dumbledore and Professor Rosetta, who were swing dancing nearby, and then to Draco with Sophia Dolohov. She saw that Neville was now partnered with Milli, while Theo spun Pansy around, much to her delight. Luna was with Devon Lee from the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and Sprout had somehow gotten Cedric, leaving Cho with Flitwick. The Patil twins were both with Beauxbatons boys beside them with Ron clearly absent.

However, no matter where Holly looked, she didn't Blaise. He wasn't out on the floor nor was he at any of the tables. A quick mental check confirmed that he wasn't anywhere in the room. She felt a flicker of

concern at that, but reality reasserted itself with the idea that he'd either gone for quick stop at the loo or out for some air. She really couldn't blame him for that latter either. It was rather warm inside. Not hot or unpleasant but still enough to make her fan her face and cast a discreet charm to help her cool down.

Viktor came to sit with her for the next song, seemingly too tired to ask for a dance, and they sat there chatting with Draco and Alé when they stumbled over a few minutes later. But the pair left after another song, only to be replaced by Milli and Theo and then Gavin, who seemed to have lost his date at some point. Others came to their table intermittently – the Weasley twins, members of the Slytherin Quidditch team, various students from Durmstrang, and even Fleur and Davies at one point. But Holly and Viktor were too busy talking to get up again until the next to last dance. They shared that and the final song, joining in the applause as the Weird Sisters bowed and exited the stage.

There wasn't a rush to exit, most people lingering to say their goodbyes, but Viktor was quick to steer her out of the Great Hall and through the front entrance to where the carriages were waiting to take them back to Hogsmeade. She saw a mussed looking Draco just behind them as Viktor took her to the side, but he merely gave a silly, wide grin and went into the first carriage.

"I had a very good time," Holly told her date as soon as they were alone again. "Thank you for asking me."

She could see his smile even in the half-darkness. "It vas my pleasure. I had a very fun experience as vell," he replied. "I am glad you agreed to come vith me. You are a very good dancer. Very graceful and light. I think the others vere very jealous."

Holly flushed at the compliment. "Thank you."

There was silence between them for several heartbeats. Both smiling but neither quite sure what to do next. Just standing there, robes brushing in the half-light of the Entrance Hall, until Viktor softly cleared his throat.

“I would kiss you,” he said then, voice low and somehow deep. “I would very much like to kiss you, but I do not think that your friend would like that.”

She could only blink at him, brain trying to puzzle that out. And he jerked his head to the carriage Draco had entered earlier, only he’d apparently been joined by Luna and Blaise while she wasn’t looking. Both of them were gazing out the window in their direction.

Holly felt her face heat up even more as the reality of Viktor’s words sank in. “I... That’s probably a good idea.”

She didn’t have to glance over again to know that Blaise had to be staring at them, and days later, Holly still couldn’t be certain why she did it. Perhaps it was because she was still coming down from the high of the ball. Or that she’d actually had a really good time with Viktor. Or maybe because he was being so very frank with her. But the next thing Holly knew, she was standing on the very tip of her toes and pressing a kiss to his face. Not quite on the corner of his mouth but not really on his cheek either. And far closer to the former than the latter than she would’ve ever normally dared. But it was enough to make Viktor completely red in the face, one hand going to her waist to steady her as she lingered. Enough to make her own breath quicken and to have her lean in closer until their noses touched.

Yet, even with her shields up, she could feel Blaise’s sudden flare of surprise. Which was probably the only thing that kept her from shifting slightly and giving Viktor a proper kiss. That and she really didn’t want to have her first one with an audience, even if it was only Luna and her best friend.

She could see the pleased and triumphant gleam in Viktor’s eyes as she pulled away, and he was still beaming as he grasped her hand and guided her to the carriage just as a few others started to walk outside. Blaise was too gobsmacked to say anything to either of them, not that they would’ve even noticed. Both were too focused on each other as Viktor helped her into the carriage. Holly barely even noticed any of the people inside it as she immediately glanced out the window, seeing Viktor just standing there and watching her in return

as they slowly started to move away. He waved, and she waved back, not stopping until the carriage turned a corner and he was out of sight. The rest of the ride past in a blissful sort of blur, and it took her a few seconds to even notice when they stopped and Luna was in the process of hopping out. Dante and Sirius were waiting for them with Narcissa Malfoy, who beamed at them all before sweeping her son into a side-long Apparition. The five individuals remaining got back to Zabini manor in short order, and Eren was quick to hustle both girls upstairs and prepare them for bed. Holly was more than grateful for her help, certain that she never would've managed to get undressed or to remove her jewellery and make-up on her own.

Luna was already changed and in bed fast asleep by the time Holly was finished. Eren went downstairs for a nightcap, while Holly drifted over to Blaise's room, hoping to fix whatever misunderstanding seemed to have cropped up between them. But he wasn't there when she peeked her head in the door and still hadn't shown up fifteen minutes later. Holly was feeling rather sleepy by that point, but she was determined to sort everything out tonight before it festered. She slid off his bed and briefly opened her senses to find him in the kitchen before heading that direction.

Blaise was seated at the breakfast table with his mother, a glass of hot cocoa in front of both, when Holly looked inside. She was about to walk in and join them when their words washed over her.

"--didn't expect her to have such a good time," Blaise was saying in slow and almost painful voice. His head was turned to his mother and away from the door, shoulders hunched. "I mean, it's Krum! She's barely shared two words to him outside of meals, and even then, he doesn't say much."

Eren just sighed and rubbed his hand on the tabletop. "I'm sorry that you did not have fun, but I can't say that I'm sorry that she did. If you wanted to go with her, Blaise, you should've asked," the witch told her son softly. "You knew that she needed a date, and it would've served both of you nicely to go together."

"I know," he responded in a near whisper. "I just thought--"

“That she understood you two would go together?” Eren questioned. “And how could she have possibly known that? She’s not a mind-reader, dear. You have to tell her if you want her to know. You have to tell her if you see her as more than a friend.”

“I didn’t say that I did,” Blaise countered in such a tone that Holly really wished she could see his face. Wish that she dared open their bond to get a feel for his emotions.

But she knew better than to risk it. Knew better than to get caught overhearing this particular conversation. Which is why she didn’t hear Eren’s response, too busy backpedalling and attempting to leave unnoticed. Fearing that her pounding heart could be heard by every resident of the house. Somehow, she managed to creep back upstairs and into her bed with no one the wiser. But sleep was understandably fragmented. Filled with images of Viktor Krum and dancing and the look on Blaise’s face when he had first seen her in her dress robes.

Blaise was back to his normal self the next day, steadfastly pretending that nothing was wrong. Holly didn’t have the heart to contradict him, only giving him an extra firm hug goodbye before Sirius took her home. But the conversation between mother and son was in her thoughts the entire day, dogging her every step and pulling at her mind. Distracting her so thoroughly that Remus became rather concerned for her health during dinner. And Sirius – the last person in the world to ever enforce a bedtime – sent her straight there afterwards, even coming upstairs with her just to make sure that she actually lay down.

Her dreams that night were terrible. More nightmares than anything. Filled with shrieks and green light and Voldemort’s laughter that was so close to Tom’s own that she wanted to weep. Dangerous whispers of plans and happenings at Hogwarts. Rituals and sinister deeds of the type to twist the bellies of even the bravest and most foolhardy Gryffindor. Pettigrew was there, and Voldemort’s snake familiar Nagini. And there was someone else with them, someone

tantalisingly familiar but foreign at the same time. As though Holly knew him – and she was certain that it was a he – but really didn't.

She woke screaming. To the feel of Sirius on the bed next to her and doing his utmost to keep her from thrashing. To the worry and fear of Remus' amber eyes. To Tom biting his lip so hard that he would've draw blood had he been able. Gasping for breath and burying her face in her godfather's shoulder and just shaking in his grasp. She didn't know how long she let him hold her like that. It felt like hours, days even, but couldn't have been more than a few minutes before she calmed and pulled away. Holly was just grateful that none of them asked her about it, just silently lending their support as they went downstairs and sat in the kitchen. Remus simply sipped at his tea, while Sirius alternated between staring at his and gripping her hand. Tom just watched them all from across the table, face a mask that she couldn't breach.

Eventually, when the tea had long gone cold and even Holly was starting to nod off, they went back upstairs. The only thing that kept Sirius from spending the night in the chair by her bed was Remus' firm hand on his arm and a promise from Tom that he would remain there. Out of the three males, Tom didn't need nearly as much rest, and he'd sat up with her before both this year and well before either of the others were back in her life. Holly's request that Sirius go to his own bed only sealed the deal, and the two adults headed to their rooms with much reluctance. She climbed under the covers as an old woman would, stiff and impossibly weary but far from sleep.

"Not a nightmare?" Tom asked after he was certain the others were gone, tone deceptively light as he sat with his hands in his lap. Both were clenched into fists.

"No," Holly commented tiredly, "it wasn't really a nightmare. More like a vision." She sucked in a breath. "He all but admitted that he's the reason I was entered into the tournament. And that someone at the school is helping him."

"I see," he replied very carefully, words crisp and attempting to be emotionless. "Not Karkaroff. We've already crossed him off the list of

suspects. I doubt that any of his students would help the Dark Lord either. Too young to have been part of his earlier regime. The same goes to those from Beauxbatons and Hogwarts. It has to be a professor or one of the Ministry people. They're free to come and go."

"I agree," Holly conceded. "Remus said that Bagman was accused of being a Death Eater but that he was acquitted, and quite frankly, I think that he's too stupid to pull something like this off. I've seen his mind, and while he's brilliant at Quidditch, most five-year-olds outstrip him mentally."

Normally, that would've at least solicited a chuckle from her friend. But tonight was hardly a night for laughter. Instead, he inclined his head. Allowing quiet to stretch between them for several heartbeats before finally speaking again.

"We need to tell them, Black and Lupin. I need to tell them," Tom corrected as an afterthought. "The truth. About me."

Holly could only nod and stare at the ceiling. "If you really are one, really are a horcrux, they might be able to help us. Or at least point us in the right direction."

"Perhaps," he admitted. "Or perhaps they will do the sensible thing and just destroy my diary."

"You know that I won't let them do that," she cut in before he could even think to add anything to that. "I don't care who or what you believe you are. You are not him and never have been."

"I may not be him," her companion retorted, "but he is me and always has been."

Tom turned away then, face covered in the shadows of the room until she could only see the slight shine of his eyes. Holly promised herself that the red gleam she glimpsed was only her imagination. Just her overwrought mind playing tricks. Her soul couldn't help but shudder at the memory of another pair of red eyes staring back at her. Fierce and burning and all too familiar. And too human but for the monster

and madness glinting through their depths. Tom wasn't Voldemort. And Voldemort wasn't Tom. Just the dark reflection through the glass.

She clutched at her covers, fingers white from the force. "Tell me something interesting," Holly murmured, but what she really meant was a request for distraction.

"What would you like to hear?" he questioned in return, daring a glance. "One of my books?"

"The Quibbler," Holly suggested. "I know that you keep a copy on you most of the time."

She leaned back against the pillows and closed her eyes as he searched through his collection of newspapers. Fighting down memories and submerging them in the deepest parts of herself. In the places where not even Blaise was welcome or wanted. Dark and forbidden and filled with recollections of her childhood and all the things she had never given voice to but he seemed to know nonetheless. The things that had initially drawn her to Tom and cemented their kinship.

Holly gave a soft sigh of relief as everything was effectively buried and surfaced just in enough time to hear Tom's next comment.

"You know me all too well." The smirk was obvious in his voice, and she heard the rustling of pages. "Let's see. Oh, here we go. The Great Acromantula Plot: How Spiders Will One Day Rule the World by Missy Ellaneous. Doesn't that just sound fascinating?"

Holly gave a noncommittal sound, one that could be taken to be agreement. Exhausted in her own way and floating closer to the edge of slumber now that she wasn't plagued or haunted.

"They are among us."

He had a nice voice, Holly decided as she settled further in her bed. Perfect for reading aloud. For capturing the attention of his audience.

Not too high or low. Middling but smooth. Seductively easy and brilliant as he was.

“ Evading our homes. Scurrying in corners and vents...”

He wasn't really like his counterpart. Tom was his own person. His own reality where Voldemort was just an afterimage. Similar but not the same. The tiny disparity that meant all the difference in the world.

“Clinging to the ceiling. All waiting for the perfect moment to strike...”

He didn't see it, but she did. Saw the truth of the situation. Saw that they – Tom and she – had more in common than Tom and Voldemort. If only she could convince him of that. Convince him to trust her as she did him.

“For the instant we drop our guards...”

Holly let the words flow over her and drifted off to sleep to the sound. To the rise and fall of his tone and lilt of his voice. She didn't dream for the rest of the night.

She was in the sitting room the next morning, tired from the night before and nearly on the edge of taking a nap despite the fact that it wasn't even past noon. Tom and Sirius were by the fireplace, enraptured in their chess match. Or rather Sirius was deep in concentration, while Tom was almost anxiously drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair. Remus had just left, gone to procure his monthly batch of Wolfsbane from Professor Snape. Giving the two Slytherins the perfect opportunity to broach a subject of some importance to her godfather. Especially since it was better if they told this particular secret one at a time.

But she just couldn't bring herself to break the comfortable atmosphere as she saw the Animagus move his knight, merely to have it captured by one of Tom's bishops. She idly watched for several moments, catching Tom as he transfigured the pieces whenever the older male looked away. Which made up for the fact that Sirius was using a switching spell on the colours to put his own in

better position. She wondered when both of them would realise that the other was cheating or that they usually did during their games.

She exhaled then and snapped her unread book shut with enough force to make both of them jump. Sirius because he'd forgotten she was there and Tom due to his nerves. They watched her climb from her chair and approach with the same sort of shocked hesitance. That, coupled with their dark hair and bluish eyes, was almost enough for them to appear like brothers or perhaps even father and son. But that thought passed as quickly as it came. Especially when Tom adopted his normal almost-sneer and Sirius' face shifted back to his usual pout that promised nothing but naughtiness and mischief.

"Problem there, pup?" her godfather asked with hint of uncertainty.

"Not at the moment," she assured him. "Just coming to a decision."

He leaned back in his seat and cocked his head to the side. "About?"

But she just motioned for Tom to rise and come stand beside her. He gave her a fierce jerk of his head in return, but Holly simply put her hand on her hip and tapped her foot. He remained resolutely in his chair until Sirius turn to look at him as well, knowing that it was now or never. Particularly when Holly felt the need to force the issue.

"So..." Sirius began and glanced between them. "I'm getting the feeling that there's something you two want to say to me."

"Yes," Holly responded. "We have a... problem but aren't really sure what to do about it and wanted your advice. But before that we need to... well, we might have unintentionally misled you on a related matter." Her eyes flickered to Tom, who was trying his best to appear nonchalant.

"Look," her godfather interrupted before either could speak, "if this has anything to do with that Skeeter woman, I swear that you don't have to worry about it. Remus and I will handle it. She just needs to learn to keep her quill to herself."

There was a pause. The fire crackled, and the ticking clock on the mantle filled in the silence.

“What?” Holly questioned then. “What are you talking about?”

Sirius blinked for a second but quickly recovered. “Er... nothing.” The man cleared his throat. “I thought this was about something else entirely.”

Holly lifted a brow but decided to let that slide for the moment. “Apparently, it is. This is actually about Tom. Or more specifically, Tom’s family.”

“What about them?” Sirius again looked at the pair of them. “What is this all about? You make it sound like somebody died.”

“No one’s dead yet, Black,” Tom inserted. “At least, no one we know. The point is that will undoubtedly change.” He crossed his arms defensively over his chest. “I didn’t always live in the diary as you know. I was once a real boy and everything.” He hesitated, mouth a firm line. “My surname is Riddle,” he divulged as though that explained anything and everything. Which it both did and did not depending on the audience.

“Riddle? Tom Riddle?” Sirius repeated, turning it over in his head.

He knew that he should know this name. Knew that it was important in some way, but he just couldn’t put his finger on where he’d heard it before. Like some half forgotten memory or dream.

“Have we met? I mean,” the Animagus clarified, “have I met the other version of you? When you first explained that you were trapped in the diary, you said that some of your soul remained in your body, right?” he asked, thinking back to their initial explanation of Tom and his circumstances.

“Well, yes,” Tom allowed. “There is another version of me out in the wide and wonderful world.” His sarcasm wasn’t lost on Sirius, but the man ignored it as usual.

“So... have we met then?” Sirius questioned again. “I swear that we have. That name just sounds so damn familiar.”

“Oh,” Holly commented with a dismissive air that didn’t at all reflect her inner turmoil, “you definitely have. Multiple times I should think.”

“He... er... you weren’t in the Order, were you? The Order of the Phoenix,” the man explained. “I know that I told Holly about it, and I’m pretty sure you were there when I did.” Sirius rubbed his chin with his hand as he tried to remember.

“No, I’ve never worked for them or the Ministry,” he added, sensing the Animagus’ next guess. “And I was hardly neutral in the war. I was--” Tom shook his head and wondered why this was just so hard to say. He’d managed to tell Holly, after all. And her... their friends. What made Sirius Black so different?

“Just tell me already,” Sirius ordered with a faint glower. “I mean, it’s not like you’re Voldemort or anything. It can’t really be that bad. What?” he demanded at the near-flinch both of them gave. “He’s not a Death Eater, is he?”

Tom clenched his hands. “After a fashion...”

“He’s... more like the head Death Eater,” Holly admitted slowly.

But Sirius still didn’t catch on. “You don’t remotely look like my bitch cousin Bellatrix. Or even that little weasel Lucius. Like I really believe that Imperius excuse,” he added in an undertone.

“Think higher,” Holly hinted.

“Even higher than the two of them? Who the hell is left? Unless Old Dark and Creepy has a kid we don’t know about,” Sirius joked, but then, his eyes narrowed. “You’re not Voldemort’s illegitimate son, are you?”

Tom resisted the urge to bite something. He'd almost swear that Black was being purposefully dense if he didn't know the man so well. Besides, he'd never be so utterly calm about something like this. He was too Gryffindor for that. Too emotional.

"No," Tom replied through gritted teeth, "I can honestly say that I'm not his son."

"His brother?" Sirius tried again.

"Getting closer," Holly answered.

The man was just stumped. "Well, you're not old enough to be his dad." He nibbled on his lip in thought. "And you said that you're not his son..."

"No, not his son," Tom repeated, trying to take a deep breath to calm himself. "And not his father."

"Who's left?" Sirius asked, and he gazed at them with a pout. "I don't see who else it could be. I mean, you said--"

"I'm him dammit!" Tom growled, control finally slipping. "I am Voldemort. He is Tom Riddle. We're the same person." He jerked his hand in a cutting motion.

There was a moment of absolute dead silence.

Holly expected shouting. Recriminations. To have to spell her godfather silent or to stun him. To have to force him to listen to their explanation. But she didn't expect this. Didn't expect Sirius to just stare at them before putting his head in his hands. To only watch with complete befuddlement as his shoulders shook and his fingers dug into his hair.

Maker and Merlin together, he wasn't crying, was he?

But then, she heard it. Softly at first and then slowly rising as he sucked in air and abruptly hunched over further in a belated attempt

to stifle the sound. Laughter. Sirius was laughing. Loud, body-wracking, deep bellied chuckles. The kind that made him red in the face as moisture gathered at the edges of his eyes. The type where if he hadn't already been sitting he would've undoubtedly ended up on the floor. Practically guffaws the like of which she had never even heard from him before. Not when he was telling her about the pranks he and her dad had pulled. Or when he thought of the hell he put his parents through for being racist bastards. Or even when she had given Draco antlers last year by accident.

Laughter. Pure and simple laughter.

Clearly, the man had finally gone insane. Tom had managed to do what Azkaban couldn't. He had broken Sirius Black.

And Tom seemed to have come to the same realisation. "Stop laughing," he murmured, voice oddly calm.

But Sirius didn't seem to have heard him.

"Stop laughing. It's not funny." Tom was louder now, progressing in volume with every word.

Sirius simply kept on going. Head thrown back as he howled.

"I said, stop laughing! It's not funny!" Tom shouted at him, nerves getting the best of him, "Stop laughing at me! I'm serious!"

There was a strangle noise from the Animagus. "No, I'm--"

"That still isn't funny, you mangy halfwit!" Tom cut in. "And neither is this!"

That only made Sirius cackle again and clutch at his stomach. "But it is! You just have no idea how hilarious this all is. How deliciously ironic. I couldn't have done it better myself." He pointed at his goddaughter. "She's the Girl-Who-Lived, and she has a Dark Lord living in her bedroom. She carries him around with her at Hogwarts.

In a diary! And Dumbledore hasn't even noticed! You've pranked the entire school. The entire wizarding world!"

He dissolved into another round of chuckles. Holly, in the meantime, could only gape at him with her mouth nearly hanging open.

"I'm the Dark Lord Voldemort," Sirius said in a mocking and high-pitched tone. "And I'm so fearsome that I had to stay in a first-year girls' dorm--"

"I was a second-year at the time," Holly corrected automatically, but at the shuddering glare sent her way by Tom, she subsided.

--I live in a diary," Sirius continued in the same voice, "and help children with their schoolwork. Bow before me and fear my wrath. I shall smite you with my terrible but transparent ways."

The man doubled over as he guffawed again and catching a glimpse of Tom as he strode forward, only made it that much worse. He barely even noticed when the teenager grabbed him by the shoulders and started shaking, wand and magical powers forgotten in the face of such utter humiliation.

"Stop it!" he commanded, fingers moving steadily closer to Sirius' neck. "Stop laughing at me. Stop it now!"

"No" was all Sirius could manage to say in response before falling under another wave of hysteria.

Tom sneered and gave him another vicious shake, hands beginning to dig into the man's throat. And Holly was on the edge of leaping forward. Of pulling him back when a voice from the doorway froze her in her tracks. She hadn't even noticed his approach in her distraction.

"Merlin, what is going on here?"

Abruptly, everyone stopped. Even Tom.

They turned as one to see Remus just gaping at them. Taking in Tom's slitted eyes and hands all but grasped around Sirius' neck. The Animagus' reddened face and tears of mirth. And Holly's extremely pained look. His mouth practically hit the floor.

"Oh, hi, Moony," Sirius chimed in with a strangled but winning tone. "You're back early."

AN: Maker, school is such a pain this year. I have exams every two weeks. Two weeks, my friends. Meaning that my writing time has effectively been cut in half. I feel like all I do most days is study.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Forty-Nine: Raison D'etre

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Forty-Nine: Raison D'etre

“So let me get this straight,” Remus began with a very pained expression. “Tom is really Tom Marvolo Riddle, who is actually Lord Voldemort. Only not really because he just spent the last fifty years in a diary. That coincidentally was found by the Girl-Who-Lived, the person famous for defeating Voldemort. And she – meaning you – have had this diary for over two years now and never once thought it a good idea to tell any of the adults in your life. Including Dumbledore, your foster mother, godfather, or me. Despite the fact that we are responsible for your health and wellbeing. But all of your friends know.” He held up a hand to keep from being interrupted. “Not only that but you’re also helping research a way to free him from his diary, while simultaneously plotting against his counterpart. Is that right?”

Holly looked at Sirius. Who glanced at Tom. Who glared at the ceiling.

“Essentially,” Holly replied after a few heartbeats.

Remus rubbed his hand over his face. He gazed at them over the top of his fingers and made an exceptionally bizarre sound. Like a cross between a giggle and a sob. He simply looked at them, saying nothing with only the tick-tock of the mantle clock breaking the silence.

“I have no words for this,” Moony finally said some indeterminable amount of time later. “I honestly can’t think of what to say. Just...” He shook his head. “No words. None at all.”

“It sounds a lot worse than it is,” Sirius tried winningly, but it fell very flat.

“I think it’s rather the opposite,” Tom muttered, arms crossed over his chest and shoulders hunched.

It was a defensive posture. Almost as if he feared the werewolf would attack him either verbally or physically. Silly to be sure. Remus was probably the least violent person she knew, and Holly included Dumbledore and Flitwick on that list. But it was an automatic behaviour. Ingrained from too many years at the orphanage. From

being a half-blood and an orphan in a world that seemed to despise both.

It made Holly's blood boil. If only just a little.

"He's not a danger to me. To any of us," she all but declared then and lifted her chin. "He's had plenty of opportunities but has been nothing but a loyal friend. Nothing but good to me. To all of us." She felt Tom stiffen beside her but kept on. "I gave Sirius a chance when everyone else would've left him to the Dementors, and it turns out I was right. I gave you a chance as well, Moony. And I was right about that, too."

Remus sighed and lowered his hand. "I didn't say he was dangerous. But you have to admit that this is all a bit much to take in."

Well, she could give him that. He was still getting used to the madness that was her existence. Used to the Dark Lords swooping about at all hours, Basilisks, heirs of the Founders at every turn, Dementors, and now the Triwizard Tournament. The plot of her life must have indeed been written by a crazed Puffskein as Theo had once claimed. Or she had done something very, very naughty in a past life. Maybe a mixture of both.

"What else is there?" the werewolf asked then.

Holly could only blink. "What do you mean?"

"There has to be a reason that you're telling us now," he clarified. "You seemed perfectly content not to do so before. So again, what else is there? You have to have left out something. Or you need us for something."

Across from him, Sirius suddenly narrowed his eyes. Apparently, the reasoning behind the confession hadn't occurred to him yet. He'd been too busy laughing at them earlier, and then, Remus had returned and interrupted everything.

“Well...” Holly began as both of them glanced at her again. Her eyes flickered to Tom, who was steadily not looking at anyone. “We’ve run into a bit of a... snag. A problem, you could say.”

“What sort of problem?” her godfather questioned, earlier cheer forgotten. Were he in dog form, his ears would’ve been lowered. “You’re not in any kind of trouble, are you? Did someone else find out about him? Someone who definitely shouldn’t know?”

“No,” Holly inserted quickly, “not that sort of trouble. We’ve just stumbled a bit in our research. In trying to free Tom from his diary.” Her attention flicked to him again, but he obviously wanted her to do all the talking. And she took a deep breath. “Does the word horcrux mean anything to you?”

Remus shook his head automatically but stopped to press two fingers to his forehead like the move had pained him. However, Sirius had an odd look on his face. Eyes narrowed as he thought hard. Laughter and amusement long gone.

“What is it?” Moony inquired.

“Well, it has to do with soul splitting,” Holly admitted hesitantly.

Remus was equal parts disgusted and confused. Head tilted to the side as he tried to puzzle it out. But it was Sirius’ reaction that surprised her the most. The Animagus went completely white from his face to his bare and no-longer wiggling toes. Holly could actually see the blood draining from his skin, which was now a pale and pasty colour.

“What did you say?” Sirius demanded, all but flying to his feet. “What did you say? Because you could not have said what I think you just did. That’s some of the most heinous and horrible magic imaginable. Terrible beyond belief. Soul splitting, Holly. Fracturing it. Breaking it. Not even Dementors can do that. They steal souls. Not outright mutilate or destroy them.” He exhaled noisily and tugged at his shoulder-length hair with one hand.

Tom, who until this point had been seemingly sullen, nearly gaped at him in surprise. He traded a raised eyebrow with Holly. A quiet exchange passed between them before she took a step toward her godfather.

“Surely, it’s not really that bad. Right?” she asked. “I mean, it don’t think we’re on the same page here. I don’t think you understand what we mean.”

“No, pup,” Sirius returned with a strange cast to his face, “I don’t think you quite understand. This was one of the few crimes in the old days – the days before the Ministry and our current government – that could get someone executed. Have their name stricken from all records.” He took a harsh breath. “People wouldn’t even speak of them anymore. Not their parents. Or spouses. Or own children. It was like becoming nothing. Less than nothing. Like never existing at all. That was the punishment for doing this to another person.” His hands tightened into fists. “Pain beyond pain. Agony that just won’t end. Worse than what even Dementors do. Completely unforgivable. I can’t even imagine someone willingly doing this to anyone. Especially themselves.”

“If it was so forbidden how do you know about it then?” Tom queried with a hint of disbelief. But it was the question on everyone’s mind.

Sirius didn’t seem to take offense. “I’m a Black.” He said that as if it explained everything. “And we weren’t always such evil and hateful bastards. Once, my family had a different role. Back in the days before Aurors.” The man sighed and stared out at nothing. “Blacks, those who fight the blackest and most terrible wizards. Who stand in both darkness and light and battle so that others won’t have to.” He said it such a way that she knew he was quoting someone else. “Toujours pur. Always pure of conscience and soul. That’s what it originally meant.”

Holly felt her brows lifting in shock. Tom and Remus weren’t far behind. This was all certainly new to her. And it apparently wasn’t something that Sirius had ever mentioned to his best friend, if his reaction was anything to go by.

“You’re serious?” Moony questioned. “That’s what it’s from? Not all that pureblood rubbish?”

For once, Sirius ignored the joke evident in his choice of words. “Deadly so. We’ve always liked the Dark Arts. But once, Blacks used them as they were meant to be used. For a good purpose. One of the few things my parents could agree on, teaching me our glorious family history.” He let out a bitter laugh. “Irony, isn’t it? That the Blacks were once the very people who would’ve fought Voldemort to the death. Even if it meant wiping out the entire family from the very oldest to youngest. Only to have so many of us become his followers. Because he preached a return to the Old Ways. The very ways that would’ve had us turn on him.” He was silent for a heartbeat. “And maybe that’s why?”

“Why what?” Remus asked, and his voice held a deceptively gentle tone. Almost hurt. But then, that might have been his headache talking. Holly could tell even from a distance that it had to be killing him.

“Why everything seemed to turn against us. Why everything started to fall apart,” Sirius added. “We forgot who we were.” He paused for a moment but then shook his head in such a way that it went throughout his whole body. Like a dog trying to free himself from drops of water.

They were quiet after that. Not certain what to say or how to react. This was not how Holly had imagined it would go. At all. She almost would’ve preferred the hexes. The recriminations. Their anger that she had done something so stupid as to trust a known Dark Lord. Why did they both have to be so damned calm and understanding? She’d been prepared to argue. To beg even. Not to have them start asking questions and then get off on this tangent. It was so frustrating.

Finally, after several minutes, Remus just exhaled and rubbed his eyes. “I’m going to bed,” he announced. “And hopefully, come morning, my head won’t hurt so much. Goodnight, everyone.”

They watched him walk for the door and slip through into the hallway. The mantle clock ticked twice in the ensuing silence.

“He took it surprisingly well,” Sirius decided then.

The pillow Tom threw hit him square in the face.

“Moony, wait.” Holly chased after him, catching up before he’d even made it very far.

Remus lifted up a hand to stop her. “Just not now, Holly.” He pressed his other one to his left temple. “Give me a chance to think this over. We’re not all like Sirius. Someone of us actually use our brains.”

He ignored the indignant “Hey!” that wafted out into the hallway.

“I... It’s fine,” Holly allowed. “Goodnight then. There’s headache potion in my bathroom cabinet. It’s one Professor Snape made for me just before break.”

The werewolf gave a small smile and bent down to press a kiss to her forehead. She just watched him as he turned and went upstairs. Only belatedly noticing that Sirius had come up behind her and slipped an arm around her shoulder.

“I’ll talk to him in the morning.”

She made a noncommittal noise as Sirius squeezed her shoulders before steering her back to where Tom impatiently waited. He directed her to the sofa and eased down beside her, allowing Tom the armchair to the side.

“Now,” the Animagus began without preamble, “tell me everything. All that you two found. Don’t leave anything out. Horcruxes. Soul splitting. The lot of it.”

Tom glanced at her.

But Holly merely nodded. With a frown, she started to fill in all the details.

Remus was more receptive the following morning. That may probably had something to do with the fact that his brain wasn't trying to beat its way out of his skull with a troll hammer. However, Holly wasn't looking a gift Kneazle in the mouth.

Either way, she convinced them of the need to look into soul manipulation in general and horcruxes specifically. Both agreed to keep researching the matter while Holly and Tom returned to Hogwarts. But it was very clear that Sirius didn't quite believe their horcrux theory or that Tom could be one. He seemed too much of a complete person, too stable, which was contrary to everything they'd learned so far of the process. Soul fragments, small soul slivers, tended to be very unpredictable and if given a physical form were almost always crazed or mad in significant ways. Tom didn't really fit that description. He had his moments, yes. But then, so did most of Slytherin.

Sirius also took the opportunity for a little family history tutoring since he thought it very remiss of him not to teach her about the Blacks. After all, Holly was one by virtue of being his goddaughter. Her great-grandmother had also been a Black, a white sheep of the family as it were. And if Sirius had his way, that would become the norm and not the exception anymore. Andy and Tonks were all too happy to be included in on the lessons.

The rest of break passed in much the same way, interspersed with visits to the Zabinis. Holly didn't mention the conversation she had overheard between Blaise and his mother, deciding it was better to let sleeping dogs lie. But it inevitably came to the forefront of her mind at awkward times. Such as the ride back to Hogwarts. Cynthia, one of the few among their group not to go to the ball, insisted on a rehash of events. Though the version they told her was decidedly edited.

"Sounds like everyone had a good time," she remarked after they – meaning Pansy and Autumn – had described everything in almost nauseating detail.

“Pretty much,” Theo agreed casually. “It wasn’t half bad to be honest.”

There were some noises of agreement.

“But I think most of us would’ve had a better time if Blaise hadn’t been so busy glaring at Krum,” Milli added with a glance at Luna since the cause of her ire was currently in the train’s loo.

Cynthia gave her a puzzled look. “Oh?”

“If he could only cast the Killing curse with his eyes alone, we’d all be at Krum’s funeral,” Theo replied with a winning smirk.

That earned him a chorus of laughter and a vague glare from Holly.

“Was it really that bad, Luna?” Cynthia questioned. “I mean, you still had fun, right?”

“Hm... Yes,” the Ravenclaw returned. “I got to dance with some of the boys from Durmstrang and a few others. Professor Dumbledore is very accomplished and agile.” Instead of seeming amused or even pleased, Luna had an edge of sadness. “I just wish Blaise could’ve enjoyed the experience, but then, the nargles always make people do strange things.”

No one really had a chance to comment on that as Blaise chose that moment to return. The matter was closed shortly afterwards, and they focused on other topics. Such as the upcoming marriage of Daphne’s mother, which was supposed to be in mid-July. Like the recent article by Rita Skeeter. One that accused Hagrid of being a half-giant. It wasn’t that ludicrous of a claim all things considered. But it did make things hard on him. Giants weren’t well liked. Though to be completely truthful, most half-breeds weren’t either these days. And Skeeter’s piece did little to paint him in a good light. She came within inches of slander but didn’t actually cross the line, thereby preventing anyone from effectively countering. Still, her insinuations and hints

were enough to cause considerable backlash for both Hagrid and Dumbledore, who was his most ardent and vocal supporter.

Things quieted down within a few days of the start of term, but to their great surprise, Hagrid was not there for the first class back. According to the Weasley twins and some of other Slytherins, he hadn't been present for their lessons either. In fact, Holly didn't see him until the first Saturday in January, and that was only because she and Blaise went down to his cabin themselves. Interestingly enough, Neville was already there when they arrived. He was on the verge of pounding on Hagrid's door but stopped when he noticed them. Apparently, he along with Ron and Hermione had been trying to see Hagrid for the last couple of days but had been rebuffed every time. And it seemed like the two Slytherins wouldn't have better luck, but to everyone's shock, the door actually opened. Of course, it wasn't Hagrid who answered. Albus Dumbledore twinkled down at them instead and graciously invited them inside, even going so far as to take their cloaks and hang them up.

What followed was a confusing mismatch of conversation and tears, though Dumbledore did most of the former with Hagrid the only one doing the latter. And somehow through it, the headmaster convinced him to resume his teaching position. Hagrid stopped his weeping, talked with them about his human father for a bit, and then, they were sent on their merry way.

If only everything could go that easily.

That Monday saw Draco's paranoia around Moody increase ten-fold. Though to be completely fair, it wasn't paranoia when it became very damn apparent that Mad-Eye was in fact out to get him. Holly still wasn't certain about the details, and really, no one else was either. But somehow, someway, Draco ended up on the wrong end of Moody's wand. Supposedly, he had accosted some Hufflepuff second-years, but Susan Bones swore up and down that Draco had merely tripped over one girl who had stopped to tie her shoelace. Either way, Moody seemed to take it as some strange sort of attack on her person. And thus the legend of the Amazing Bouncing White Ferret was born.

McGonagall, who had caught Moody in the act, had not been thrilled. Neither had Professor Snape. And his enraged shouts had echoed from his office all the way to the Slytherin common room before the door had been shut. Lucius Malfoy, of course, had been less than impressed with that matter when he visited the headmaster the day following the incident. He undoubtedly would have been there the day of, mere minutes after he learned, had Draco not delayed his letter until that night. It wouldn't have done his father much good to have shown up at Hogwarts at midnight after all.

As for Draco himself, he was understandably mortified about the entire mess. Doubly so when he learned that Moody had only been reprimanded, a verbal and proverbial slap on the wrist. And he alternated between outright glaring and flushing with anger from his seat in the very back of Moody's class – in the chair closest to the door – for the rest of the month. Even worse, news of their encounter had spread like wildfire throughout the entire school. Usurping even rumours of Holly's relationship with Viktor Krum for a time, a topic which had held the top spot for common interest since the Yule Ball.

Not that they had a relationship or anything. They were just friends. Entirely platonic friends. Who sometimes met in the library and talked about things. Academic things! And ate meals across from each other at the Slytherin table, something that happened to be entirely coincidental. Really.

They were just friends. That was Holly's story, and she was sticking to it.

Friends who happened to try their best not to mention the giant purple hippogriff in the room. And by that, she meant the second task. The one taboo topic between them that was never broached directly. The closest he came was a casual comment that he hoped she could swim, which she could thanks to Sirius and Blaise. The nearest she gave in return was that the lake would most likely be chilly.

Thanks to her friends – and Vincent's suggestion about the merpeople – Holly had a fair idea of the task. With the Gillyweed that she'd procured from Neville, who'd been sworn to secrecy, Holly knew how to get through it. She still wasn't entirely certain what they

would be taking from her. What she'd find valuable enough to go fetch from the bottom of the lake. The only material things she really cared about were from her parents, and Dumbledore wasn't stupid enough to risk those. Her friends and family were much more valuable anyway. And really, what idiot would stick a person down there?

She didn't even need to resort to the woefully inadequate hint that Cedric had tried to give her about the egg. Holly had told him straight-up about the dragons, but he hadn't really returned the favour. The best he'd done was throw in the password to the prefect's bathroom, the male prefect's bathroom. The gesture was nice, she supposed. But honestly, he might as well have said nothing at all. Or maybe he just hadn't wanted to say anything in front of his hoards of fans or girlfriend Cho Chang, who practically hung off of him like a human-shaped leech most of the time. It'd been hard enough for him to move the five feet away from her to have a semi-private conversation with Holly.

Of course, they weren't the only ones who had paired off in such a manner. It seemed that if the Yule Ball was good for anything, it was in forming couples. Everywhere she went, it was as if they had spontaneously formed on the spot. Giggling. Holding hands. Doing other things. She'd actually caught one of the Weasley twins – and she was ninety percent sure it was Fred – snogging Angelina Johnson behind the statue of Vivi Orunitia on the fifth floor.

Holly's own Housemates weren't spared either. Titania's new beau from Durmstrang practically lived in Slytherin he was there so often, and Vincent and Autumn were so incredibly open and obvious that even a Gryffindor first-year would notice. And when Draco wasn't ranting about Moody, he was all but attached at the hip to Alé. It was becoming a common sight for him return to the dorms at night with a very dazed and goofy grin. They had yet to say anything, but Holly also had her suspicions about Daphne and Dimitri Dolohov, who seemed to be spending increasing amounts of time alone and without Pansy as their usual tag-along.

All the new couples didn't really bother Holly per se, though she wished they'd at least be a bit quieter about it. To be honest, she was

glad for them and had all her attention focused on other matters to worry about it herself. It had just never occurred to her before that her friends would pair off so early. She'd known that they would eventually, but that had always seemed like such a distant concept in her mind. Something foggy and indistinct that wouldn't happen until they were all out of school. A childish and foolish notion, yes. But then, she'd never had cause to question it.

Even with that, Holly seemed to be taking it all the best out of everyone else. Pansy often made despondent noises about being single and so very available. That had only increased when the first Hogsmeade weekend of term rolled around and she didn't have Daphne a ready presence at her side. Instead, she went around with her new best friend Tracy Davis, a Slytherin the year behind them and a cousin through a recent marriage on her mother's side. Milli seemed to be in similar if slightly altered straights. It wasn't unusual to see her staring morosely at Gavin and his string of girlfriends. Which had expanded from Athena Avis – his date to the ball – to include Padma Patil during the first Hogsmeade weekend. It was obvious that Milli was disappointed, but there was little Holly could do about it.

Life continued on in that vein. Holly worked on her dual project for Arithmancy, the shield she'd used during the first task and the serpent summoning spell, with some progress. Professor Rosetta made noises about a project to be due before Beltane but never seemed to get around to assigning it. Much to the relief of her students. And for once, Trelawney wasn't predicting Holly's death at every turn, instead deciding to focus her efforts on the other champions. Apparently, Viktor was not only to be trampled by a heard of rampaging spiders, but he was supposed to be betrayed by someone he considered an ally. Fleur was going to be attacked and beheaded by a mud monster-Minotaur hybrid, while Cedric would win the tournament but subsequently choke on a chicken bone.

The rest of her classes were going along a similar line. And knowing what she did of the second task, Holly couldn't help but notice some subtle help from the faculty. Professor Snape had them brewing Resuscitation Elixirs and Diving Draughts, potions used to prevent drowning. Flitwick instructed everyone on the mechanics of the

Bubble-Head Charm, something that was normally reserved for fifth year. Even McGonagall seemed to be getting in on the act, teaching them how to transfigure paper into a swordfish.

The weeks and days leading up to the next task weren't Holly's most relaxing time at Hogwarts. But compared to her second year, things actually weren't that bad. People continuously asked if she had solved the riddle of the egg yet, going so far as to offer their personal assistance. But Holly merely nodded and smiled. If they were truly persistent, Blaise or her Housemates ran the off with a few quick words or hexes.

Valentine's day came and went, and Holly received far more notes and gifts than she knew what to do with. Many were anonymous but not at all. There was one in particular that made her eyebrows lift, but she couldn't be entirely certain of the sender. She had her suspicions but kept those to herself. Out of her immediate circle, Blaise was the only other person to get more than a card or two. Most of those were from the same people who had asked him to the ball, people keen on taking the Girl-Who-Lived's supposed boyfriend. But as far as she could tell, he didn't hand out any of his own or even reciprocate those he received.

Thankfully though, that whole mess was for only a single day, and things returned to normal by the next morning. Most of it was forgotten by then too as the second task of the tournament drew closer. Excitement was rampant in the air the week before it, but Holly approached everything with a calm reassurance. She'd had months to plan and knew exactly what to do.

Everything would go fine. Perfectly fine.

He was late. Holly felt her eyes dart to the clock on the far wall of the room and back to the book in front of her. It was nearly eleven. Definitely past curfew for fourth years, who had to be back in the dorms if not in bed by ten. But Blaise wasn't back yet. He'd left with McGonagall when she'd approached them in the library. And he'd promised to meet up with her and go over tomorrow one more time. To revise her plan for the second task.

It was quiet here in Slytherin's passageways. Away from the hustle and bustle of the House proper and the common room. Only Luna, Milli, and Draco were here with her. The others were covering for her absence in the dorms, and Tom was off helping Daphne and Autumn on the assignment they had due on Wednesday. An essay for Sprout that they'd both neglected.

But where the hell was Blaise? And what could McGonagall – or the headmaster, as the woman had claimed – possibly want with Blaise that could take this long? There didn't seem to be any alarm through their bond. No, it was just the usual thrum of warmth and pleasantness she always felt. No heartbreak or sadness, so nothing had happened to the Zabinis. No nervousness or apprehension; he couldn't be in trouble. So what was taking so long?

Holly tapped her fingertips on the tabletop. And glanced over her book to look at her friends, Draco was inspecting his nails, while Milli and Luna played a round of Exploding Snap. None of them seemed particularly worried or concerned. But Holly had the odd feeling that something was about to happen.

There was a flicker of alarm through their bond then. The sensation of Blaise reaching desperately for her. Of him trying to whisper something across the expanse. Of fingers touching, brushing. Being jerked away. Suddenly. Fiercely. Painfully.

And then, the world ended.

Not literally. But that was what it felt like to Holly. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't think. Someone had jabbed out her eyes and left her blind. Someone had taken her hands and tied them up behind her. Pain and hurt and sorrow and whywasshesoalonenow?

She heard screaming. Someone was shrieking. Dying. And it took Holly a moment to realize that it was her. That the burning need in her lungs was for air. And it cost her every bit of energy to suck in a gulp and then another one. Heart banging against her ribs like she had just run a marathon and been asked to do it again. Ears ringing and hearing words but unable to make sense of them.

Then, a lifeline cast into the sea of despair and agony. Someone cutting through like a light to the fog.

“Maker! Are you guys hurt?”

The voice was familiar. Tantalizingly so. Awed but so terribly frightened.

“No, not even a scratch strangely enough. But look at the furniture. She destroyed everything!”

Another voice. This one female like the first but somehow younger. The false calm in the eye of the storm.

“The furniture? Look at her!”

Male this time. Fear bordering on panic.

Holly wanted to demand who they were, but she couldn't get her mouth to work properly. Couldn't even peel her own eyes open to look. Could only sense the ache in her head where someone should be but was not. Could only feel hands as they grasped her face, hear them calling to her.

“Holly? Holly, are you there?”

The first person from earlier. Female but deeper than expected and smooth beneath the worry.

“I think she's just knocked out. I mean, she breathing, and her skin is still warm.”

The boy again. A teenager. Cultured and level tones even now.

“Not for long though. We need to get her to someone. Especially if that was what I think it was.”

The other girl. Almost whimsical, playful but for the circumstances.

She puzzled over that. Over the familiarity of them all. And the conversation drifted over her pained existence as she tried to sort it all out. Tried to make sense of the seeping agony inside and the frightening chill in her soul.

“Does she have the mirror on her?”

“Sirius isn’t answering.”

“We need to take her to someone.”

“Who? Not Pomfrey.”

“Not Dumbledore either.”

“Professor Snape then. He’s the only one left.”

So worried. So afraid. About her. For her. Frightened and trembling as they tried to figure out what to do. How to help her.

And it struck her like a lightning bolt. She knew who they were. These were her friends.

Milli. Luna. Draco.

But where was Blaise? He wasn’t there. Not anywhere. Not beside her. Not in her head. His warmth was gone but not departed. Out of reach and hidden. Cloaked and shadowed. Beyond her internal sight. Holly looked, reached out. Frantic. Searching. But he wasn’t where she could go.

“There are too many people in the common room for us to go that way, even with the cloak” she heard Milli say then.

“We’ll go through the passageways.” This time it was Draco.

“Somebody’ll see us in the hallways at the end though.” Milli again.

“And if we go get him ourselves, someone will notice that, too.” Now Luna.

“We’ll just have to take it slow.” Draco.

“I’ll float her along with my wand. Drape the cloak over her.” Luna.

“Grab the map and come on.” Milli.

Throbbing silence then. Minutes passed. Maybe hours. Days. Holly couldn’t tell. Everything was foggy and indistinct under the haze of pain and hurt and anguish. Of Blaisewhereishelcan’tfindhim.

And then, there was the sound of knocking. Of pounding on a wooden surface. Of a door opening with a soft whoosh of air.

“What on Earth!?” Holly heard a man – and her frazzled mind swore that he sounded like Professor Snape – exclaim. “Do you have any idea what time it is?”

“We didn’t know where else to go, Severus,” Draco was attempting to explain. “Sirius didn’t respond to the mirror; I think he’s supposed to be at Saint Mungo’s on rounds tonight. It’s too close to the full moon for Lupin to be coherent. And we can’t take her to Pomfrey. Not for this.”

A hand tightened on her shoulder. And there was the sensation of fingers lifting up her chin, strong but gentle. Followed by a sudden and sharp inhalation.

“Maker above and below. What has happened to Miss Potter?” her Head of House – and yes, Holly was certain it was him – demanded. “Let’s get her inside.”

Holly felt herself being carried forward and then set on a very comfortable and pliable surface. She expected to sink down into it, but somehow, she managed to stay floating on top.

Professor Snape's voice ghosted to her ears. "Draco. Miss Lovegood. Miss Bulstrode. I'm waiting for an explanation."

There was a second of silence. Holly could practically feel them looking at each other, even if she really couldn't see them.

"Psychic shock," Luna pronounced grimly. "I know of nothing else that could do this to her."

"Psychic sho..." Their teacher's voice trailed off, only to take on a glacial tone. "Explain. Now!"

But there was no answer forthcoming. Holly felt her ears strain in the ensuing quiet, and she wanted to speak. To reassure them. But it hurt so terribly much. Like she was drowning in the nothingness in her head. In the void where Blaise should have been. Where he needed to be. He was so faint, so tormentingly close. If only she could reach out further. If only she could grasp onto him and bring him home.

"You will give me an explanation!" the professor snarled then. "Psychic shock only occurs from mind-altering spells or effects. Cruciatus. Imperius. Other things that are just as illegal!"

"And when a bondmate dies or is otherwise blocked completely," Luna murmured.

The Potions master cut off mid-rant. "What! You can't possibly mean... You cannot be suggesting... She isn't--"

"She is, Severus," Draco answered.

"And you did not think to tell anyone!" their Head nearly shouted back. "She needs training. To be taught shielding. Mental protections. A guiding hand at the very least! It's a miracle the girl has not gone mad before this!" Once more there were fingers on her face, probing and palpating.

"Sirius and Remus already know," Luna returned with a false tranquillity. "They've known from the beginning. All of Holly's inner

circle know. She told us at the end of her second year. I believe that Mrs. Zabini suspects. But none of the faculty. I don't even think Dumbledore realizes. She's been very careful around him especially."

The teacher snorted through his now pinched nose. "I should think so. Else this never would've occurred. At least tell me that no one saw you come down here. We cannot risk anyone else knowing of this. I assume that you did not go to a prefect, or they would've come to fetch me personally."

"No one else knows or saw us," Draco stated after a moment of thought. "We used... er... Well, Holly has this... thing that lets us move about unnoticed."

"I know about that wretched cloak," Professor Snape inserted drolly. "Her father had the damn thing, too."

"Well," the blond boy went on, "we used it to get here without them seeing her."

"And before that?" the man questioned. "Something surely must have occurred to cause this."

"You see," Milli began almost tentatively and not at all sounding like herself. "McGonagall came by the library and took Blaise just before curfew. We waited for him in the dorms, but he never came back. And then... well," she trailed off as if deciding how much to reveal. "Holly... er... just went all quiet and stiff. She wouldn't respond at all. Something must've happened to Blaise."

Professor Snape's resulting growl rumbled all the way through his fingers and into her arm where they were now touching. "That bloody fucking tournament," he sneered, not caring for his language or audience. "The champions are all supposed to have a hostage for the task tomorrow, and I have it on good authority that Mr. Zabini is to be hers. He is most certainly in a spelled sleep as we speak."

"Do you think that's what caused this?" Draco asked, almost hopeful that could be the answer.

“Perhaps I misspoke. The magic is more like stasis than slumber. Which is undoubtedly related to her reaction.” She felt more than heard him exhale. “I take it that Mr. Zabini is her bondmate. Her stabilizing link.” It was not a question.

“Yes,” Luna replied simply.

“And only a complete fool would ever separate them,” the Potions master concluded. “Such things have been illegal for centuries. Since the time of the Founders and before. If we... If any of us on the faculty had known, we would’ve worked around it. Picked someone else. Like that fool Black.”

“I think he might be the only reason she hasn’t lost it completely,” the lone Ravenclaw inserted.

“Completely?” Draco interrupted incredulously. “What the hell do you call this then?”

But Professor Snape jumped in before he could have his answer. “What do you mean, Miss Lovegood?”

“It’s only a theory, Professor,” Luna said softly, voice nearly a murmur. “Unfounded and untested. But she does have a very strong tie to her godfather. As strong as that for a child to a true parent. But I am fairly certain he hasn’t adopted her in the magical sense. Yet, it’s too strong for there to have not been some type of earlier connection.”

“Speak plainly, Miss Lovegood,” their Head ordered. “Your friend’s life may depend upon it.”

Luna made peculiar sound, almost but not quite a sigh. “Blaise isn’t her only connection. The main one, yes. But not the only. She had to have had one earlier as powerful as she is. One when she was a baby.”

“And you suspect Black then?” Professor Snape held a note of disbelief. “But surely, Azkaban and their separation would’ve seen to the end of it.”

“Or made it go dormant,” the blonde insisted. “It’s only a theory either way. No way to test it without Holly’s cooperation.”

“Which we certainly can’t get at the moment,” Milli put in grumpily. “What are we going to do then?”

“You can help her, can’t you, Severus?” Draco asked. And the alarm in his tone was so terribly obvious.

The Potions master was quiet for a very long moment. So quiet that Holly only heard the sounds of his breathing and that of his robes against her arm as he shifted beside her.

“Perhaps,” he admitted finally, solemn and tired. “There are potions that can temporarily block her abilities for a time. Long enough for her to get through the night and the task tomorrow. They would at least keep her sanity intact.”

“How is that going to help?” Milli questioned then. “Isn’t the blocked bond what caused this in the first place?”

“Yes,” Luna returned, “but that’s not what the potions will do. They’d make her as if she weren’t a Mind Mage at all. The bond or lack thereof wouldn’t matter then. If these potions the ones I’m thinking of, they are meant for such a situation.”

“Miss Lovegood is correct,” Professor Snape added. “These are for when bonds are severed.”

“For when their bonded dies you mean,” Draco corrected in a soft but accusing voice.

“Yes,” their teach responded simply, and Holly felt him straighten beside her. Felt but didn’t see him raise his head and square his

shoulders. "Miss Lovegood, Miss Bulstrode, stay here and tend to her. Fetch me if anything changes." He stepped away, and she heard his footfalls on the stone floor. "Draco, we have potions to brew."

She was vaguely aware of their departure but more so of the fact that Luna and Milli had knelt on next to her. One of them was gripping her hand, while the other brushed hair from her face with a light and trembling touch. Both were silent, startlingly so.

And Holly allowed herself to drift in the dimness of her inner world. In the haze and repeated twinges of remembered and still on-going pain. Knowing they would keep her safe, even as she desperately wished for Blaise.

Relief was a long time coming.

Raison D'être: Reason for Being

AN: I'm on break for a week and then back into the trenches once more. My schedule this block looks a tad bit easier, so there should be more updates in the near future. I appreciate that everyone is so understanding about this whole mess.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Fifty: Qui Vive

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

Chapter Fifty: Qui Vive

Consciousness was such a strange thing really. More of a spectrum than absolutes. And she hovered in that everlasting grey area between wakefulness and dreaming. There but also far away. In a realm beyond mortal limitations like reality. Pain. Loss. That aching emptiness inside her mind where something – someone – should be but was not.

Holly contemplated the conundrum inherent in that. In the void within her, but that somehow, it didn't hurt as it should. As if someone had wrapped a bandage around the wound though it was still tender and throbbed at her mental touch. Yet even that did not change the fact that she was injured and should be in agony but was not. That she was missing some fundamental part of herself.

Blaise.

Where was Blaise? Why wasn't he there with her?

He was gone. He was not there. But he wasn't completely gone. He was just out of sight, just out of reach. So tantalisingly close that her fingers could almost brush his skin. That she stretched out, further and further. Searching in the dark. Needing to find him. Needing him there like her body needed water and oxygen to survive.

But it was too dark to see him. Too difficult to search him out when she couldn't even see.

And Holly opened her eyes.

She was standing in the centre of a forest. Surrounded by tall trees with smooth bark and impossibly green leaves. The grass was soft beneath her bare feet, and a flower curled up from the ground by her toes. Dappled sunlight peeked through from above her, but as she tilted her head up, grey and roiling clouds suddenly blocked her view of the sky. And a cold wind rustled through the clearing to send a chill down her spine.

Holly shivered and wrapped her arms around herself, but it was gone as quickly as it came. Leaving her alone once more with nothing but foliage for company. She turned in a wide circle to look all around before returning to her starting point. There was a road directly in front of her now, and Holly wondered at the fact that she hadn't noticed it earlier even as she peered forward. It was wide and paved with well-fitted stones, stretching out before her as far as she could see. And Holly walked towards it before she even noticed that there was a felled tree blocking the way. She frowned at that and thought to go around, only to realise that the undergrowth was too dense for her to make it through.

She paused, uncertain what to do, before glancing around again. And it took her a moment to comprehend that this was not the only path. Just the most obvious one. There were others present, far narrower and hidden behind trees. Difficult seeming and winding off to Maker only knows where. None of them seemed nearly so inviting, save one just to the left. It was smaller and not as welcoming as the first. Not paved and smooth but with bumps clear along the way. But it was clear and unblocked. The only real way out of... wherever this was.

Holly only hesitated for a fraction of a second, weighing her nonexistent options, before starting for it. Her bare feet touched the path a moment later, and she thought that she heard barking laughter. Felt warmth like lying in the grass on a hot summer day with the wind tugging playfully at her hair. The sudden shock of being pelted by snowballs but enjoying every minute of it. The gentle tingle of healing magic without the antiseptic smell of the hospital wing. And... dogs?

Yes, Holly was pretty sure that she could see them cavorting in the background. Catch the swish of a wagging tail out the corner of her eye as she walked in further. Hear the click of claws on the solid ground beside her and feel a canine head butting at her fingertips with each step. Feel herself smiling in response and curling her fingers through soft fur before turning to glance down.

And then, Holly woke up.

She opened her eyes for real this time. Staring up blearily at the solid stone ceiling above her. It was a middling sort of grey. Not warm but

not cold either. Dark but not sinister and somehow oddly familiar. Like she'd been here before. Or perhaps just somewhere similar.

The girl puzzled at that for a moment as her other senses started to take hold. Smell came second, trailing after sight with the telltale scent of the castle. She was in Hogwarts at least. No other place had this particular combination of magic, parchment, and barely there mustiness. But here, it was accompanied by a subtle hint of spice. Nutmeg and thyme and a little something else that she couldn't quite identify. Not unpleasant or overpowering. Very supple and faintly metallic. Like a cauldron after they'd added all the ingredients but the potion wasn't quite done yet.

Taste was third, running behind smell and finally managing to catch up. Holly really wished it hadn't. Especially when her tongue decided that it had been drenched in combination of soapy water and unwashed tea cosies while she was unconscious. Her stomach chose to add in its own unhappiness shortly thereafter, forcefully and noisily reminding her that it was both starving but that the mere mention of food might be enough to make it rebel completely.

Touch came next. The brush of fabric over her skin and the realisation that she had a dried cloth on her forehead. The slight but firm weight of a blanket draped over her from shoulders to toes and a pair of impossibly soft socks on her feet. Heat on the exposed parts of her skin that wafted from the nearby fireplace and fought against the vague chill to the air.

Hearing was fifth. A crackle of fire. The constant tick of a clock. Her own breathing as she exhaled. The rise and fall of voices in the background. Near enough to be heard but too far away to make out. For her to tell who they belonged to or if they were even friendly.

Holly waited then, waited for the last of herself to arrive. But nothing else was forthcoming. No feel of people around her or thoughts that belonged to someone else or the press of another being on her mind. Where there'd always been even the faintest trace of that when she shielded her hardest, there was now nothing. Just her in her head.

A very novel and obscenely frightening prospect. And even as she felt a pang of utter surprise, Holly wondered if this was what it was like to be normal. To be just a regular girl. Well, a regular witch. Her magic was still there – it had never left – but it felt peculiar now. As if someone had decided to erect walls inside of her without her permission. Walls and a door that they had promptly slammed shut and pounded into place.

Which probably explained the dull ache just under her temples. And the fact that her limbs were impossibly heavy as she tried to move her hand up to her eyes. She wanted to turn her head, but it was like her body wasn't quite up to obeying her commands. As though it were still trying to decide if it wanted to take the day off or not. The most she could manage was a very pathetic groan.

For that, Holly received an intake of breath and the rustling of robes from somewhere nearby. Followed by the sounds of someone approaching.

“Miss Potter,” that someone – a man – called. His voice was rich and distant. Dark and elegant like the best sort of chocolate.

And really, she could go for some Honeydukes right about now. If only to get rid of the wretched taste in her mouth and hope that the smooth chocolaty goodness would appease her belly. It worked on Dementors, so why not?

“Miss Potter,” he said again, and she belatedly recognised him as her head of House. “I know that you're in there.”

She felt a hand lift up her chin, even as his face moved into view. He was pale as usual, but there were dark circles under his eyes. Like he hadn't slept for a significant amount of time.

“Wha--”

But a bottle was promptly shoved under her nose before she could even complete the question.

“Drink this. It will clear your head.”

She tried to move away. “Blaise,” Holly croaked. “Where is he? I can’t--”

“The potion first,” her teacher demanded in a paradoxically gentle tone.

Holly felt that hand on her chin again. It tipped her head back and forced the bottle to her lips. She swallowed reflexively, nearly gagging at the taste. Cinnamon and burnt socks, a revolting combination. But it did serve to clear her thoughts, sharpening everything around her with a crystal clear clarity and easing the dull throb in her brain.

“Where’s Blaise?” she asked again, eyes now able to really focus on the man before her and with a voice softer and more like her own.

“He is safe at the moment,” Professor Snape responded as he leaned forward to study her. Tilting her head this way and that. He drew his finger across her line of vision, satisfied that she tracked it instinctively. “Everything seems to be in order. Any additional symptoms?”

“No.” She responded without thought, not caring either way. She had other priorities. “Blaise--”

“Is perfectly fine,” the man insisted as he shoved another potion at her and made her take it, too. “We’re more worried about you at the moment.”

Holly grimaced. “I’m fine. Tell me about Blaise.”

“Surely, your mind must be addled, Miss Potter, if you think that you are anywhere near to fine,” Professor Snape returned with a sardonic edge.

“Circe’s sake,” another person inserted then with a testy tone. “Just tell her, Snape.”

And a second man stepped into her view, dark hair pulled back at the nape of his neck and the beginnings of stubble on his chin. His Healer's robes were a stark contrast to their surroundings, neat but wrinkled like he'd slept in them.

"Blaise is fine if a bit soggy at the moment," he informed her. "He's just been roped into that damn tournament."

Holly goggled at him. Absolutely certain that she had to be hallucinating. Shouldn't he still be at Saint Mungo's?

"Sirius?" she breathed his name like she couldn't believe her eyes.

Which was only reinforced when her godfather bent down next to Professor Snape without a single sneer. He didn't even so much as try to elbow the Potions master out of the way as he reached forward to brush her hair from her face. Holly for her part just stared at him. Her gaze darted back and forth between the two of them as she fought the urge to pinch herself.

Sirius Black and Severus Snape were occupying the same space, and nobody had lost their head yet. Everyone's limbs were still attached. No one looked to be hexed. There weren't scorch marks from missed curses. There wasn't even any blood.

Surely, the apocalypse was upon them. If Merlin chose that very moment to walk through the door, Holly wouldn't be the least bit surprised.

But when he wasn't forthcoming, she turned back to her godfather. And gaped a bit more.

"What?" he asked when she wouldn't stop staring. "I told that you that Blaise isn't in any danger. Don't you believe me?"

"I know. I heard," she said in response. "But what are you doing here?"

“What am I doing here?” he repeated incredulously. “Holly... You had a... well, the phrase mental meltdown comes to mind.”

“I did?” Her voice was a bit too high and surprised for anyone’s liking.

“Oh, yeah.” Sirius hesitated for a moment, as if uncertain if he should clarify. “They put Blaise in status for the tournament. He’s supposed to be rescued by you. And you... er... didn’t react very well to it.” His bluish grey eyes drifted to her head of House. “Your friends came to Snape here when they couldn’t reach me. And he helped you until they eventually got through. I’ve been here most of the night.”

“Most of the night?” Holly somehow found it within herself to sit up. Of course, Sirius’ hand on her back and the press of Professor Snape’s fingers on her arm certainly didn’t hurt.

Her godfather nodded. “You’ve been out for awhile. It’s nearly eight in the morning.”

“Oh.” She wasn’t sure what to make of that. “I suppose that I’ve missed breakfast then.”

Sirius coughed, and his gaze flickered to the man beside him. As if he wanted to ask if she was all there upstairs but wasn’t sure if that would be the best approach. Professor Snape seemed to be thinking much the same.

“How do you feel, Miss Potter? Truthfully,” he added, knowing her all too well in that moment.

“Er...” The girl hesitated but decided that honesty would probably be the best policy. “Like I’ve been trampled by a hippogriff and then bandaged back up. Only not nearly that well.”

Snape snorted. “I can see that you’ve lost none of your wit. Anything else to add to that?”

“Not really... It’s just... strange,” she admitted, moving her head from side to side and rolling her shoulders. “I can’t hear any...” But she stopped herself short as she suddenly remembered her audience. “I mean to say--”

“That you can’t hear anyone else,” the Potions master guessed. “That you are alone in your mind. Unable to sense anything or anyone.” He tapped his finger on his chin. “That would be the blocking potion.”

Holly felt her heart stop. “You know about that?”

“Yes, you foolish girl,” he scolded, apparently deciding that she was well enough for a lecture. “I most certainly know now. What with your terrified companions bringing you here – nearly comatose – in the middle of the night. Unable to do more than whimper and wring their hands at your condition! Had Miss Lovegood not recognised your symptoms, you’d most likely be in Saint Mungo’s. Drooling on your chin as your brain leaked out your ears! So yes, Miss Potter, they were smart enough to tell me. Unlike other – let us say, foolish! – members of my house.” He ended that statement with a distinctive curl to his lips and certainly not a pleasant one.

She blinked at him. “I’m sorry?”

Only it came out as more of question.

“I would think so,” Professor Snape continued with a finger jabbed her direction. “This knowledge would’ve been useful earlier. Such as your first year here. As soon as you realised what you were.” He suddenly clinched his hands into fists, as though fighting not to wrap them around her neck. “Whatever possessed you to go for years without telling a single adult of your abilities?”

“Sirius knows.” Holly gestured to her godfather, who had thus far remained unexpectedly silent.

“A single responsible adult,” Snape corrected dismissively.

“Hey!” Sirius crossed his arms indignantly.

They both ignored him.

“Remus, too,” the girl defended with a lifted chin.

“Oh, yes. Tell the werewolf.” Her professor rolled his eyes. “I’m certain that he was of great use to you, possessing all the skills necessary to ensure your continued mental health.”

“Remus is too useful,” Sirius said instead, but he quieted at the glare directed his way.

Professor Snape turned back to Holly. “While other members of your family and I may have been at odds, I am your head of House, Miss Potter. You are my responsibility for as long as you dwell within these walls and remain a student of Hogwarts. My door has always been open to you. And I know for a fact that the headmaster would never turn anyone, least of all you, away. Further,” he said in a louder voice, rising above her attempt at interruption, “I’m certain that Eren Zabini would’ve been most helpful in this situation as well. She is still your foster mother, though you may not actually reside with her.”

He paused to let that sink in. Studying her as if he could see the proverbial wheels turning in her head.

“That isn’t even considering the fact that her son is your bonded,” he went on, but his voice was softer now. “That his ties to you and hers by proxy go far deeper than fostership. It is very deep and ancient magic, Miss Potter. Some of oldest among us. She could’ve sooner sold her soul to the Dementors than betrayed your trust. And yet, neither he nor you told her. Told any of us. I suspect that you wouldn’t have even told Black here had he not already known from your parents. For surely, they would’ve told him the second they understood the truth.”

Holly nearly gawked at him as his words washed over her, as she took in the blaze to his black eyes. There was anger to his voice. Hot and simmering. But something else. Something deeper. Anger and –

dare she even think it – hurt. That she hadn't trusted him. An odd thing for a man like him. Someone who knew the true value of trust.

And yet, he was her head of House. The adult at Hogwarts most likely to look out for her best interests. He'd protected her from Quirrell her first year and Voldemort right along with him. Nearly had a heart attack when she faced a basilisk her second. Had been willing to face a werewolf and an escaped mass murderer her third. Had even set up a fostership with Eren so that she wouldn't have to go back to the Dursleys. That didn't even count all the little things.

Looking after her in the hospital wing. Keeping McGonagall and the other professors off her back when they were being distinctly unfair. Checking in during all the holidays she spent at school.

There were a lot of things he did for her, had done for her. And they really started to add up now that Holly thought about it. He knew that she was an orphan after all. That if he didn't do those things, no one else would think to either.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, and this time, she truly meant it.

But what she really wanted to say was "thank you."

Professor Snape though seemed to understand. He was quiet for a moment before he finally sighed and glanced away.

"You are forgiven, Miss Potter," he replied magnanimously, even as he resolutely didn't look at her or Sirius.

But her godfather wisely didn't comment. Studying the wall behind her shoulder as if it held all the mysteries of life. Allowing the almost awkward silence to stretch out before he gave a little cough.

Holly wasn't exactly certain what to else say and instead took the opportunity to glance around. She knew that she was obviously still at school, but she was in a completely unfamiliar room. Stone like the ceiling but the floor was covered in rick rugs, and it was nearly impossible to see the walls behind the bookshelves and tapestries

and even a few paintings, though all of them seemed to be of nature scenes. A fireplace and the surrounding mantle nearly took up the length of the wall to her left and the one just behind her had an opened door that seemed to lead to a short hallway. In between was a sturdy set of burgundy leather chairs that looked both ridiculously comfortable and expensive, even as they matched the sofa she was on.

All in all, it rather looked like someone's sitting room. And Holly had a sneaking suspicion just whose it was.

"Where am I?" she inquired, doing her utmost to change the topic.

"My quarters," her head of House responded. "I take it that this isn't what you expected."

Well... no, it wasn't to be perfectly honest. She – like many students – thought it would be a twinge less homey and a heap more dank and brooding. Though to be fair, that would've fit with his public persona.

"It's lovely," she said instead. "Though I expected less red." Holly inclined her head to the large Oriental rug just beneath her professor's feet, which was nearly maroon with gold and silver interwoven around the edges. "Very Gryffindor."

Snape lifted an eyebrow. "That happens to be a family heirloom on my father's side," he informed her with an ironic and amused tone. "And I dare say that you should see what McGonagall's rooms look like before you cast aspersions about my character."

But she could see the smirk tugging at his lips as Sirius and he helped her to her feet and then steadied her as she swayed ever so slightly. Professor Snape glanced at the clock on the mantle once he was certain she wouldn't fall.

"The second task is in just over an hour," he informed her. "The blocking potion should last until at least noon, but I want you back here as soon as possible. And bring Mr. Zabini with you. I do not want a repeat incident of last night."

“I’ll be here, too,” Sirius chimed in for good measure. “Just in case.” He carefully didn’t look at Snape, who was only too glad to return the favour.

“I suppose...” the other man allowed as he turned back to his student and silently summoned something with his wand. It was a suspiciously familiar schoolbag. “Mr. Malfoy brought a few of your things very early this morning. I dare not question how he managed to obtain them, however.”

He frowned at the mere thought but quickly shook it away as he took her by the elbow and steered her to the doorway on the far wall and short corridor beyond. He led her roughly halfway down before stopping by what she could only assume was the bathroom.

“Here,” her teacher directed. “I rather say that you need a bit of... freshening up before your big performance. But don’t dawdle. Or else I’ll have to fetch you my...”

The man cleared his throat as he thought that better of that statement. And the fact that it involved one of his female students and various states of undress.

“Or I’ll send Black to get you. Salazar only knows what he’d do to such a tempting and undefended target,” he muttered before releasing her. “One hour, Miss Potter,” he reminded as he handed over the bag.

And then, he was gone.

Holly merely exhaled and slipped inside. Making very certain to be finished by his deadline. Memories of a half-asleep Remus, rainbow skin, and Medusa-like hair were enough to keep her from giving Sirius such a unique opportunity.

She made it down to the lake with ten minutes to spare. Professor Snape had offered to escort her, much to Sirius’ chagrin since he’d obviously had the same idea, and she accepted only because it

wouldn't look as odd. Her bathing suit was snug under her robes, and Holly was inwardly still marvelling at Draco's forethought to include not only her Gillyweed but also that as Snape took her to where the other champions had congregated. Cedric waved at her arrival, and Viktor was quick to smile as she walked up to stand beside him, watching with eyes a bit too wide as she removed her robe and folded it neatly. Her head of House took both it and her shoes before she could even glance around for a place to put them, offering up a nod farewell as he turned towards the stands. Holly inclined her head in return ensuring that the swimming cap covering her hair was still snugly secured.

Draco had even thought to pack that, too. She really needed to get him something nice for his birthday this year.

The next few minutes were spent in self inspection, going down her list to make sure that she had everything. Gillyweed, check. Swimming gear, check. Wand and wand holster, double check. Glasses, left behind since she'd used the same spell that Tom had taught her for the Yule ball.

Holly finished in just enough time for Viktor remembered how to speak, face red and gaze fixed on the outline of her bathing suit, which was actually more of a wetsuit than anything. He flushed deeper when he noticed her attention, standing there in his own swim trunks and nothing else. He was thinner than she thought he'd be, but then, Durmstrang robes were very thick and almost bulky. Still, it was very obvious that he played a sport professionally, and the majority of the female population in the stands seemed to be enjoying the view, while most of the males shot him envious or downright hostile looks.

Viktor didn't even notice. He had his eyes on other things.

But Bagman interrupted before he could even think to speak to her, magically amplifying his voice as he had done for the World Cup. The four champions were directed by Percy Weasley, who was once more filling in for his boss, to the edge of the lake. And it was no coincidence that Viktor and Holly ended up next to each other and the furthest from any of the judges.

“Good luck,” Viktor murmured just above her head as he leaned over slightly.

“To you as well,” she whispered back.

He just smiled at that. But they didn’t have a chance to talk further as Bagman started to speak again. Holly just used the opportunity to cast two quick spells on herself before she shoved the Gillyweed into her mouth and began to chew. It was unsurprisingly rubbery. She knew it would be, especially after she’d practiced with it in the Prefect’s bathroom; Cedric’s hint had been good for something after all.

The whistle blew as she was still chewing, but Holly started to wade out into the icy depths anyway. However, the warming charm she’d just cast on herself worked wonders the deeper in she went, making what should be freezing water feel nothing worse than lukewarm.

Nearby, the other champions were similarly heading into the lake. Fleur and Cedric cast the Bubblehead charm within seconds of each other, though Cedric first paused to transfigure his robes into swim trunks. Fleur already had on a bathing suit and barely even paused as she dove underwater. Viktor, however, took a different approach, instead choosing to transfigure himself into something that wouldn’t be out of bounds in a Muggle horror movie. A strange combination of man and shark that at first glance didn’t seem intentional until Holly realised that it was the only possible way for him to make it to the bottom but also keep his wand.

All three of them were already out of sight when the Gillyweed finally started to take effect, and Holly eased beneath the surface as her gills took form but didn’t start swimming. Instead, she released her wand from her holster and took aim. The Gillyweed made it hard to speak, but she’d practiced the transfiguration and performed it flawlessly on the first try. A simple bit of drifting debris instantly transformed into a swordfish, one both resistant to the fresh water and strong enough to pull her to the bottom of the lake. A fact that was proved as she used a second spell to all but lasso herself to it.

And then, they were off, swimming fast and hard towards the centre of the lake. Cedric could only gape as they – Holly and her fishy chariot – passed him by like he was standing still, but Holly didn't see either Fleur or Viktor as she quickly descended further into the water. Not that she could see much of anything until she lit her wand, but even with that, she was going by too fast to make out much of anything. Save perhaps a few darting silvery fish and a grindylow that nearly developed whiplash as she sped by it.

The bottom of the lake became visible in no time, and it only took a few minutes more for her to see the outline of the mervillage. She slowed the swordfish as they reached the outskirts, instead choosing to swim on her own with it following along behind her. Holly passed by odd stone dwellings with open doorways and what seemed to be windows without glass. The grey-skinned faces of the merpeople peeked out at her as she went, yellow eyes narrowed and thoughtful but also full of excitement. Several even came out of their houses, watching openly as she went by and eyeing her fins, gills, and fishy companion with obvious interest.

After all, this was probably the most entertainment they'd had in years. Watching a bunch of wizards and witches make idiots of themselves. Holly knew that in their place she'd probably drowned from laughing so hard.

If they even could drowned. She wasn't sure about that part.

And she was still considering that as the houses around her became more numerous. As did the number of spectators. Swimming in farther and farther into the village until she came open what appeared to be the town centre, a circle of tall pillars with a giant merperson statue in the middle. And tied to the tail of it were the still forms of four hostages.

Holly cast a single glance at the merpeople around her. Dozens, maybe even up to a hundred or more, many carrying very sharp looking spears. But when, they did nothing more than stare back, she swept forward.

All Holly could see was Blaise. Chin tucked to his chest and brown hair drifting in the current. Eyes closed and hands bound behind his back.

All she could feel was the void in her soul as it went from dully aching to a roaring in her ears. So close. Reaching out. Nearly there.

But she stopped short in front of him as her eyes caught up with the rest of her. As she took in the sheer enormity of the situation. The fact that not only was Blaise tied down here but so were three other people. Cho Chang, Viktor's cousin Radek, and a little girl who could only be Fleur Delacour's sister. All of them in a deep sleep. All of them just as seemingly lifeless.

There was a sudden lump in throat that had nothing to do with the remnants of Gillyweed still present. And Holly could only swivel her head from one to the next as her heart sunk down near her ankles.

She needed to take Blaise and go. She needed him. And not just as a hostage. They needed to leave and get the hell away from here.

But...

But Fleur's sister looked like she couldn't be more than eight or nine years old. And Viktor's cousin was always so nice to her, was Titania Shackbolt's boyfriend. And Cho, while not the friendliest of people, was still a student at her school.

Holly couldn't just leave them.

And as if sensing her dilemma, a voice spoke up from just to her left.

"They will come to no harm, witch-child."

Holly whirled to see a particularly ferocious and wild looking merwoman – mermaid? – watching her from by the nearest pillar. Her eyes were yellow like the rest of them, hair also a deep green, but there was something to the way she held herself. Something commanding but also elegant. And Holly just knew that this was the person in charge.

“We will not let them drowned,” the woman continued as if knowing that Holly was taking her measure. “They cannot even wake until they reach the surface. Friend Albus has ensured it, and he has long proven himself a great guardian to those both above and below the surface.”

“Yes. Of course,” Holly said in a near mumble.

But the chieftain still heard her.

“You speak our language?” the woman questioned then, daring to move closer with an extremely interested cast to her face and dolphin-like tail twitching excitedly.

Holly shifted. “Not normally,” she sheepishly replied. “I haven’t had time to learn.”

“And yet, you still had the foresight to attempt magic to do so.” Admiration was clear in her voice. “Very impressive. Which of the schools do you attend? Is Friend Albus your keeper? Your mentor, yes?”

There was something peculiar to her tone. Almost searching.

“Yes, he is my headmaster,” Holly returned slowly. Not sure if this was a good or bad thing. But judging from the woman’s expression it was more likely the former.

“I thought as much.” She gave sharp nod and then pointed her spear towards the hostages. “Go on. You should not delay. The others will be here soon.”

“Right,” the Slytherin allowed with a nod in return before going back to the task at hand. Her retrieval of Blaise.

He was so close. Just out of reach. Tied to the statue with his brown hair soaked and robes drifting in the water. He nearly looked dead, and if it weren’t for the steady stream of bubbles coming from his

mouth, Holly would almost think he was. She couldn't hear him. Not like she always could, there in the very back of her head. But looking at him, it was almost like she could. A faint echo in her ears, a ringing in the void. Drawing her closer. Begging her to reach out.

And her fingers went for him before she even thought it through. Hand lifting of its own accord and floating through the water until it met his face.

Then, she was lost. Dragged under. Jerked in a thousand different directions. As her mind battered against the block between them like waves crashing on the shore. Thunderous and heavy and so impossibly desperate. Thrashing and roiling until a fine crack appeared. But that only spurred it on further. Made it that much more ferocious and frantic. Scrabbling and scrambling, talons dug deep until it cracked further and just a bit – the teeniest and tiniest hint – could get through. Clawing even more as that became a trickle. As she could finally feel Blaise alive if distant. And something like a howl built in her chest, something like triumph swelled.

But a firm hand on her wrist suddenly brought her back to herself. Pulled her away. And Holly heaved a breath through her gills and then another. Blinked her eyes to see the murky depths around them and Blaise still unconscious before her. Belatedly realising that the chieftain was holding her steady, eyes wide and very concerned.

“Witch-child?” she questioned, not loosening her grip, even as the girl stilled.

“I...” Holly began.

But she shook her head furiously. Trying to free herself from the desperate feeling boiling up from inside. Boxing it in and shoving it down. Using what little connection and strength she could now feel from Blaise to wrap a binding around her wounded soul and forcing it to quiet.

“Witch-child?” the chieftain asked again and just watched her for a moment before gradually letting go. She seemed on the verge of

questioning further but then seemed to think the better of it. "Perhaps you should take your boy and go."

"I... Yes, we need to go."

Holly mentally stumbled over the sentence, shaking her head once more for good measure. And she turned back to Blaise and hesitantly used her wand to free him. Very aware that the merwoman was floating nearby, poised to catch her once more. With trembling hands, Holly brought Blaise to her, taking painstaking care to only touch his robes and not bare skin. She secured him with a spell before lassoing her still waiting swordfish once more. But she paused as the chieftain reached out to touch her again.

"What is your name, witch-child?" she asked then, just before Holly could direct her fishy chariot away.

"Holly," the Slytherin replied automatically.

More than a little surprised that the word translated. Though Dumbledore's first name did, so she really shouldn't have been.

"Holly Potter."

The chieftain gave her a toothy smile, an odd thing for a woman who lived underwater. "I find you very interesting, Holly Potter. The next time Friend Albus visits be sure to come with him."

It was not so much a command as a suggestion. But one that warranted further consideration when she wasn't at the bottom of the lake with an unconscious Blaise, time ticking short, and another mental meltdown in the works.

Holly just nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Then, she was off. Pulled full force behind the swordfish as it darted for the far shore. And it seemed like the journey back took no time at all. Not nearly as long as getting there. Or perhaps her perception was just skewed. Tilted slightly since her heart and stomach weren't twisted around

each other anymore and Blaise was still firmly at her side. A warm if faint presence in her mind.

They broke the surface directly in front of the judge's table, and Holly couldn't have possibly made it more perfect if she had planned it that way. She had just enough time to pat her swordfish on the nose before she ended the spell and it was just a floating piece of trash once more. But that was driven from her mind as Blaise gave a great shudder beside her, simultaneously opening his eyes as he spat out a gust of water.

"Gah... What a nasty flavour?" He spat again for good measure before his gaze unerringly found her and instantly lit up. "Holly..."

He started to reach for her, but she grabbed him by his wrist, which was fortunately still covered. Telling him with her eyes not to make a fuss. Blaise blinked groggily but remained silent as she slowly pulled him towards the shore, not even noticing as her gills faded and vanished as she started to climb out. She did, however, note the roaring of the crowd around her and the very determined set to Professor Snape's face as he strode over. Dumbledore was hot on his heels, and between the two of them, they managed to get Holly and Blaise the rest of the way out of the water. She didn't release Blaise once there, instead tightening her grip as Madam Pomfrey all but snatch them from the two professors and swaddled the pair of them in heavy blankets. The potion she forced on each was incredibly hot and made steam blow out their ears, nearly taking off Holly's swimming cap before Snape reached up to remove it.

The judges were all milling about the area. Dumbledore gave Blaise and her each a pat on the shoulder and a wink before turning to speak with Madam Maxime. Professor Snape was now hovering behind them with an unreadable look, doing his utmost to send Pomfrey on her way. Karkaroff was the only one who hadn't left the judges table, dark eyes staring out at the lake as though by his will alone Viktor would be the next to surface. And in the background, above the crowd, she could hear Bagman yelling.

“Great Scott! Miss Potter is the first to return with her hostage. Back before twenty minutes even. That has to be some sort of record!”

Well, that answered those questions. But it didn't address how the other champions were fairing. Or if they'd even made it to the village yet.

No one else seemed to be worried about that though, and Holly herself quickly forgot as Blaise slipped closer, practically melded to her side were it not for their blanket barrier. He was taller than her by a pretty good margin and had to lean down to whisper in her ear, not wanting to be overheard.

“How are you holding up?” he whispered. “I know that it can't have been easy. I had no clue what they were going to do or else I would've refused.” His breath and lips were warm where they brushed her skin.

She turned her head to look at him, remorse clear in his eyes. His face was neutral, but she knew him well enough to see the unhappiness underneath. The ache that had to be in him as surely as it was in her. She was the Mind Mage, yes. But he was her bondmate and felt the loss as surely as she did.

“It's not your fault,” she murmured back, keeping her voice low. “You tried to warn me. That was enough.”

There was an odd buzzing sensation in her head, like there was someone else close by. But she was still too shaken up to figure out the source. Having to search visually instead but not seeing anyone who was close enough to hear besides her head of House. And he knew already.

“No,” Blaise continued in low but heated tone. “No, it's not. It could've--”

She was still holding his wrist and tightened her grip automatically. Part warning, part comfort.

“Later,” she mumbled as she saw Pomfrey bustling back over to check on them.

His eyes narrowed and flicked to her, but he straightened as she approached and took her treatment without comment. Giving nothing away as the mediwitch tutted and huffed and muttered about stupid tasks and even stupider headmasters for allowing it. That last part was enough to make even Holly’s lips curl upwards, and she saw a hint of that reflected on Blaise’s face as he turned to her once more. But it fluttered away as his eyes drifted to her hair. He reached out then, and Holly felt him pull something free.

“Just a beetle,” he said at her questioning look. Holding his fingers and the struggling bug up to inspect it in the winter light. “Ug... Nasty little thing. No telling what kind of diseases it carries.”

He was on the verge of crushing it, but Cedric choose that moment to appear at the surface of the lake. The beetle wisely used the opportunity to escape while he was distracted with clapping. And it was all too obvious that Blaise was glad that Viktor wasn’t coming in second place this time around.

He still came in third though since Fleur didn’t actually complete the task. Having to be rescued from a pack of grindylows before she even made it to the village. And her near sobs at being reunited with her sister were still ringing in Holly’s ears as Professor Snape hurried them back to his rooms nearly an hour later. Doing his utmost to get them both there and out of sight before the rest of the castle’s population returned from the lakeside.

Snape got them inside with no one the wiser and instantly started a diagnostic, attempting to tell when the blocking potion would wear off. He frowned when Holly told him what had happened in the lake but was seemingly pleased that the potion had still held, if only just. The man studied them for a long and quiet moment after that, gaze measuring as it went from one Slytherin to the next. Until finally, he just shook his head.

“I shall leave you to it,” he stated and stepped back. “I expect that Mr. Malfoy or Black will be by shortly with another change of clothes. But until then, I suspect that your... connection is best dealt with on your own.”

And with that, Professor Snape gave a sharp nod and departed. Leaving them alone and with only each other in his sitting room. Holly barely had time to blink before she felt a hand grasp hers and squeeze.

The mental wall between them instantly crumbled, and it was like coming home. Like walking in the door of her house with Sirius after being gone for months. Like waking up in Zabini manor and having all of them smile as she sat down to breakfast. Like laying down in her bed at Hogwarts and knowing that she was meant to be there and nowhere else.

Without even realising it, Blaise pulled her in for a hug. Her head tucked beneath his chin and arms wrapped firmly around her sides, hands and fingers twisting into her robes.

“Holly,” he breathed into her hair.

And she pressed her face to his neck and just held on.

Qui Vive: who goes there, on guard; a sentinel’s challenge. Literally, (long) live who?

AN: Med school is hard. That’s all I have to say about it. And I haven’t even been through finals for this block yet; those aren’t until January.

There’s also a quote from Mulan in here. Bonus points if you catch it.

To everyone who reviewed: Thanks.

Chapter Fifty-One: Skeeter’s Scurrilous Scoop

Ever Hopeful,

Azar

CHP52